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Inter-institutional collaboration: A case study of factors contributing to the viability of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium

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INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION: A CASE STUDY OF
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE VIABILITY OF THE
IOWA COMMUNITY COLLEGE ONLINE CONSORTIUM

A Dissertation

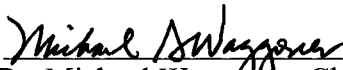
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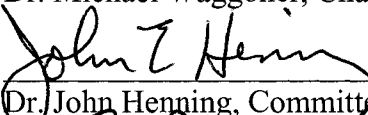
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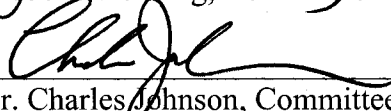
of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education


Approved:


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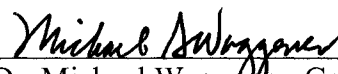
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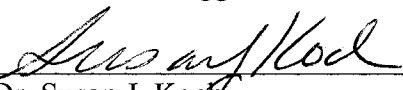
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INTER-INSTITUTIONAL COLLABORATION: A CASE STUDY OF
FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE VIABILITY OF THE
IOWA COMMUNITY COLLEGE ONLINE CONSORTIUM

An Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

Approved:


Dr. Michael Waggoner, Committee Chair


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December 2005

ABSTRACT

In the competitive arena of distance education, the strategy of inter-institutional collaboration has been cast as a promising approach in reducing costs, expanding services, and demonstrating responsiveness. However, the work involved with collaborative arrangements has proven difficult, and the results have frequently failed to meet expectations.

The problem this research sought to address is that little is known about the factors involved in making distance education collaborations work. The Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCOC) was selected as a unit of analysis on the basis of purposeful sampling. The ICCOC, a comprehensive distance education collaboration involving seven member colleges, has demonstrated a pattern of rapid enrollment growth and financial sustainability. The purpose of the study was to identify, describe, and offer an interpretation of the key factors that contribute to the viability of the ICCOC.

The question that framed this inquiry was: "What key factors, individually and in combination, contribute to the viability of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCOC)?" Data was collected using multiple sources, including document review, direct observations, and semi-structured interviews with seventeen members of Oversight Committee, the group charged with planning and administering all aspects of the organization. Data was analyzed using content analysis and constant comparisons, and categories and themes were identified. Triangulation, member checks, and researcher reflexivity were used to establish and maintain the trustworthiness of the findings.

The analysis and interpretation of the data suggests a complex set of interdependent factors in the context, inputs, structures, processes, and outcomes of the consortium have contributed to the organization's viability. Two overarching patterns, sound business practices and positive group relationships, and the prevalent culture of the ICCOC--reflected in its values, beliefs, and norms--illustrate how the factors have blended and interacted to influence the performance of the organization.

DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this dissertation to my dear family. Thank you for your support and understanding, and thank you for making this project worthwhile.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express profound gratitude to the members of my committee for their encouragement, support, and constructive comments. I am especially appreciative of the guidance and wisdom provided by Dr. Michael Waggoner, my committee chair and advisor.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The idea that colleges and universities should collaborate across institutions in efforts to address common concerns is not new. A wave of higher education consortia occurred in the 1960s and 1970s in response to student needs, economic pressures, and federal government incentives (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999). In recent years, however, a number of forces have coalesced in the context of higher education that make the case for inter-institutional collaboration even more compelling. Difficult financial times are accompanied by increasing expectations from legislators, governing boards, and the business community for more agile and responsive academic institutions. At the same time, colleges find themselves grappling with the goals of containing costs while increasing educational access for an increasingly diverse student population. Competition among institutions for students and resources is escalating, while the information technology revolution permeates all aspects of the educational process.

In response to these forces of change, colleges and universities have shown increasing interest in collaborating inter-institutionally in a variety of areas including library services, registration, technology, purchasing, admissions, faculty development, international programs, economic development, and fundraising (Dotolo & Strandness, 1999). In particular, colleges and universities have gravitated toward distance education as an arena in which to explore collaborative activities with other institutions (Epper & Garn, 2003; Hanna, 2000a; Katz, Ferrara, & Napier, 2002; Twigg, 2003). The keen focus is understandable, given the considerable consequences for colleges and universities as

decisions and activities related to distance education intersect with broader financial, demographic, technological, political, and competitive concerns.

Achieving success in the rapidly changing and increasingly competitive environment that envelops distance education will likely require new organizational approaches, structures, and abilities (Oblinger, Barone, & Hawkins, 2001). In recognition of the need to bolster competitiveness by adopting new organizational strategies, models, and competencies, a growing number of distance education consortia, partnerships, and alliances have been formed in recent years (Bates, 2000; Carchidi & Peterson, 2000; Eckel, Affolter-Caine, & Green, 2003; Epper & Garn, 2003; Hanna, 2003; Katz et al., 2002; Twigg, 2003). While these collaborative efforts take shape in a variety of forms, the scope of activity is reflected by the finding that, among the institutions that offered distance education in 2000-2002, 60 percent reported participation in some type of distance learning consortium (Waits & Lewis, 2003).

The basic notion that colleges and universities should cooperate in areas of mutual interest has both rational and intuitive appeal. However, many colleges and universities have discovered the hard way that the process of collaborating with other institutions in the design and delivery of distance education programs can be time-consuming and difficult, with results that frequently fall short of expectations. As numerous examples of derailed partnerships demonstrate, desire, in itself, is not sufficient to create and sustain successful collaborative efforts (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999; Duin, Baer, & Starke-Meyerring, 2001; Moran & Myringer, 1999). If motivation alone is not sufficient, the question begged is: "What factors *are* critical in making distance education collaborations

work?” Striving for a deeper understanding of answers to this question is a primary motivation for this study.

Inter-Institutional Collaboration: Concepts and Benefits

One point of departure in efforts to better understand the grist of joint distance education initiatives is to first consider the core element of all such undertakings--the process of inter-institutional collaboration. In its most basic form, inter-institutional collaboration has been described as a process in which organizations with a stake in a problem actively seek a mutually determined solution (Gray, 1989). Wood and Gray (1991) expanded this definition with the proposition that “collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide issues related to that domain” (p. 146). Stated another way, inter-institutional alliances, partnerships, and consortiums can be thought of as organizational efforts formed to address problems that are too complex and protracted to be resolved by unilateral efforts (Gray & Wood, 1991).

Broadly speaking, the creation of collaborative arrangements has been identified as a significant strategy used by organizations to cope with problems presented by the turbulence and complexity of their external environments (Berquist, Betwee, & Meuel, 1995; Gray, 1989; Gray, 1996; Gray & Wood, 1991). In addition, collaboration has been identified as a common strategy in responding to expectations for higher education “to become efficient, productive, cost-effective, and excellent” (Offerman, 1997, p. 28). In the present environment, characterized by escalating competition, pinched finances, and shifting stakeholder expectations, colleges and universities share an overarching concern

within their problem domain of how to best meet expectations of constituents, protect their student base from competitors, and expand educational access to new audiences.

To borrow terminology from the business world, through the process of “creating value together,” successful inter-institutional efforts generate a degree of collaborative advantage, an especially important outcome for institutions engaged in rapidly changing markets (Kanter, 1994, p. 97). Throughout the literature addressing inter-institutional cooperation, the twin benefits of economy and efficiency stand out as sources of collaborative advantage. In the context of higher education, colleges and universities are drawn to collaborative activities as a way of increasing capacity through achieving economies of scale and creating efficiencies to accomplish things collaboratively they could not do individually (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999; Eckel et al., 2003; Lang, 2002). Hanna (2000b) suggests that cooperating in order to better compete will be the “name of the game and a critical strategy for universities in the future” (p. 345).

Given the current terrain of higher education, the potential advantages associated with successful collaboration have strong appeal. After all, what’s *not* to like about the idea of educational institutions, faced with a common set of problems, working together to create “win-win” situations through reductions in costs, expanded offerings, and improved services and competitiveness? While the basic notion of organizations working together for mutual benefit seems straightforward, and the potential benefits appear compelling, most people with direct experience in trying to make these arrangements work quickly attest to the grinding tensions and frustrations that can afflict efforts at inter-institutional collaboration. And, as the track record of more than thirty years has

demonstrated, the enthusiasm and positive expectations that accompany new collaborative ventures in higher education “frequently do not endure over time, and neither do the organization forms that embody them” (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999, p. 17).

The Collaborative Challenge: The Gap between Rhetoric and Reality

The research exploring the efficacy of inter-institutional collaborations, considered in a variety of contexts, has been consistent in suggesting the process is very difficult, and “the potential value is not being realized” (Huxom, 1996, p. 4). Glowacki-Dudka (1999) notes that, despite the benefits typically associated with collaborative endeavors, “the risks and barriers are high” (p. 2). Vangen and Huxom (2003) caution that collaborative partnerships are “difficult to manage, and the likelihood of disappointing outputs is high” (p. 5). In general, the success rate of collaborative arrangements is quite low, with outright failure estimated at between one out of two and one out of three (Bergquist et al., 1995). In efforts specific to the context of distance education, Twigg (2003) asserts that inter-institutional collaboration is “particularly difficult to accomplish” (p. 6).

In spite of a distance education market described as appearing “huge and ripe for the picking” by Marchese (1998) and the potential efficiencies and economies associated with successful collaborative efforts, high-profile examples that underscore the difficulties, complexities, and risks associated with inter-institutional distance education efforts are numerous. Touted as a distance learning pioneer at its inception in 1998, the Western Governors University, a multi-state effort to “reinvent” higher education, has

consistently fallen short of enrollment projections and has been described as “arguably insignificant in its current iteration” (Kinser, 2002, p. 163).

Declining an offer to join the Western Governors University, in 1996 California initiated its own virtual entity, the California Virtual University, a joint project of the state’s three public colleges and university system and private colleges created to serve as a central source of information for distance learning courses. As of August 1998, more than 95 institutions listed in excess of 1,600 courses and 100 full degree programs or certificates available at a distance (“California Virtual U. Doubles,” 1998). Planners hoped to attract 50,000 students in 1998-1999 and up to one million students within five years (“California May be First,” 1998). However, unable to secure funding from the major segments of California higher education, the entity ceased operation in the March of 1999 (“California Virtual University is Scrapped,” 1999).

Other efforts to collaborate to offer distance education programs have shared a similar fate. For example, following only two years of operation, Columbia University shut down Fathom, its for-profit online learning consortium, after contributing \$14.9 million to the venture while generating only \$700,000 in revenues (Carlson, 2003a). Among the other casualties of the shake out of high-profile distance learning organizations are New York University’s NYUonline, University of Maryland University’s UMUOnline and Temple University’s “Virtual Temple” (Carlson & Carnevale, 2001).

At the state system level, given the political and financial drawbacks of creating new stand-alone virtual universities, the collaborative model has dominated. Nevertheless,

Twigg (2003) states that distance education collaborations present a significant set of challenges, and these consortia have yet to prove their long-term viability:

The assumption that a collaborative model will get you where you want to go is totally unsubstantiated. Collaboration is an extremely difficult thing to accomplish in higher education, just as it is in the world of business. Unfortunately, there are precious few examples of success in either, especially in relation to the number of collaborations that have been attempted. (p. 5)

Although the track record of inter-institutional distance education collaborations has been mixed, and collaborative arrangements among institutions can be difficult to keep on track, Gatliff and Wendel (1998) suggest the potential benefits warrant a thorough investigation of the possibilities. Yet, potential collaborators who investigate the benefits and outcomes of joint ventures discover the rhetoric associated with the advantages ascribed to collaboration frequently does not match the reality of the outcomes. To narrow the gap between the potential benefits and the pattern of under-performance reflected in the literature, better insights are needed into the quintessential issues related to inter-institutional collaboration.

In my work as an administrator on the front lines of distance education efforts at a regional comprehensive public university, I have experienced, first hand, the challenges in weighing whether or not to collaborate with other institutions in the development and delivery of distance education programs, as well as the arduous work involved in trying to develop workable collaborative arrangements. As I reflect on these experiences, I am puzzled in trying to clarify in my own mind what might be done differently to help improve the processes and outcomes associated with collaborative efforts.

Part of my intrigue with the topic stems from the fact that, while many inter-institutional distance education endeavors fail, a few “beat the odds” in creating viable collaborative organizations. At this stage in the study, the working definition of a viable collaborative organization will be based on three foundational outcomes associated with joint ventures identified by Gray (1996): an agreement among partners is reached, the agreement is implemented, and the alliance survives.

A case of inter-institutional collaboration that has achieved these outcomes is the Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCOC). The ICCOC is a voluntary partnership comprised of seven community colleges formed with the purpose, as described by a former director, of providing for “the efficient and effective delivery of online courses that that may lead to an Associate of Arts degree (C. Chrisman, personal communication, June 8, 2001).

My assumption as I begin this inquiry--that the ICCOC can be considered a case of a viable distance learning collaboration--is based on a review of documents available on the organization’s website, informal communication with the consortium’s staff members, observations at two annual ICCOC staff development conferences, and a review of the literature. The participating colleges have reached agreement in the form of a Statement of Understanding and bylaws that articulate a mission for the organization “to offer quality educational opportunities to online students supported by a comprehensive set of student support services” (Appendix A). The colleges in the partnership have implemented the agreement by creating and offering online courses, developing a technical infrastructure/support system, establishing student support services, and

delivering staff training opportunities. An “Oversight Committee,” comprised of representatives from each college, has established operational guidelines for the consortium and provides strategic direction. A full-time director manages and oversees the ICCOC’s operation.

The consortium has not only survived, it has experienced rapid growth in the number of courses offered and the number of students enrolled. Less than a year after its inception, the ICCOC offered 11 online sections with 272 enrollments during the fall of 1999. By the spring of 2004, the Consortium offered 210 course sections, with 4,681 enrollments. In addition, a recent decision to extend the partnership agreement through 2007 further underscores the viability of the organization.

I believe that an in-depth inquiry into the Iowa Community College Online Consortium presents an excellent opportunity to increase the understanding of “what makes collaboration work” in the context of a viable distance education consortium that has experienced rapid growth, and seems to have established a firm foothold in a very competitive distance education market. In Chapter 3, I elaborate further on the rationale for selecting the ICCOC as a context for this case study.

Problem Statement

One of the perplexing strategic decisions regarding distance education rests with the extent to which colleges and universities choose to collaborate with other organizations. The idea that educational institutions should collaborate with others in developing, delivering, and supporting courses and programs has strong rational and intuitive appeal. However, while the potential benefits of collaborative ventures are

highly touted, the results frequently fall short of expectations. The problem is that the factors involved in making distance education inter-institutional collaborations “work” are little understood.

The lack of understanding of these factors can be attributed, in part, to a lack of in-depth research in the field. Inter-institutional collaborations are growing in both number and strategic importance, yet there is a relative paucity of research exploring the phenomena (Austin, 2000). Offerman (1997) points to the need for additional research with his conclusion that a contributing factor in disappointing results from collaborative efforts is the fact there is little to guide potential collaborators other than intuitive or common sense approaches. In particular, there has been a lack of research examining the dynamics and actions involved in building and sustaining collaborative relationships (Donaldson & Kozoll, 1999). In addition, the existing literature has seldom addressed the actual process of collaboration (Glowacki-Dudka, 1999; Legler & Reischl, 2003) or the effects of collaborative processes (Hardy, Phillips, & Lawrence, 2003).

Gray (1989) summarizes the significance of the problem with the conclusion that, despite the powerful incentives to collaborate, because of a lack of understanding about the dynamics of collaboration, “the capacity to do so is underdeveloped” (p. 54). The limited research exploring the factors that are instrumental in contributing to viable inter-institutional efforts constrains the capacity of leaders to make informed decisions regarding initial involvement in collaborative ventures. For those institutions that become involved in collaborative endeavors, insufficient understanding reduces the likelihood of success. Given escalating competitive pressures, difficult financial conditions, demands

by stakeholders for greater accountability, and the significant level of resources involved in creating and operating collaborative distance learning programs, institutions can ill-afford to invest time and other resources in efforts that fail to generate benefits and advantages. In addition, efforts that fail to materialize due to a limited understanding of the dynamics involved in inter-organizational collaboration represent lost opportunities for both students and institutions.

Purpose

The purpose of this case study is to identify, describe, and offer an interpretation of the key factors that contribute to the viability of the Iowa Community Online Consortium (ICCOC). Stated another way, I am interested in gaining an in-depth, holistic understanding of the factors that make this particular collaboration “work.”

Research Questions

The overarching research question that frames this inquiry is: “What key factors, individually and in combination, contribute to the viability of the ICCOC?” To identify and understand the nature of these factors, work must be done to situate them in the context of the case, as well as tap into the perspectives of the people working within the organization. Toward this end, the following supporting questions are posed:

1. Why was the ICCOC formed, and what are the organization’s purpose, mission, goals, and strategies?
2. What role has the ICCOC’s environment played in shaping its strategies, structures, processes, and culture?

3. What are the organization's key inputs, processes, outputs, and feedback mechanisms?
4. Which factors in the structures and processes of the consortium are most important in sustaining the consortium?
5. What do participants perceive as the most significant challenges, problems, and threats the consortium faces?
6. What advantages and disadvantages do the participants associate with the consortium?
7. What are the characteristics of the ICCOC's culture, and how do they influence its performance?
8. What do consortium participants view as the most important strategies and ingredients for the ICCOC?
9. How do those involved with the consortium describe their experience? [i.e., what does the consortium's work mean to participants, and what do they value most?]
10. What is the nature of leadership within the consortium?
11. How are the key strategic, structural, process, and cultural factors related to each other?

Organizing Framework

While a variety of meanings are associated with the term collaboration (Huxom, 1996; Winer & Ray, 1994; Wood & Gray, 1991), the focus of this study will be on the "organizational form" dimension identified by Huxom (1996, p. 8). Inherent in this

perspective is the assumption that collaborative relationships can be viewed as a special form of organization with boundaries and cultural and political issues (Donaldson & Kozoll, 1999). Stated another way, when organizations work together and embrace collaborative processes to engage in inter-organizational management and change, they are, in essence, “inventing a new type of organization” (Finn, 1996, p. 152) with “a new culture distinct from the cultures of their home base organizations” (Winer & Ray, 1994, p. 76).

Efforts to increase the understanding of factors that contribute to the efficacy of collaborative organizations must take into account the interactive processes, structures, environmental influences, the nature of shared rules and norms (Wood & Gray, 1991), as well as aspects of strategy development (Epper & Garn, 2003; Katz et al., 2002; Moore, 1999; Murgatroyd, 1990). It follows that knowledge of the factors that contribute to the viability of collaborative organizations might be enhanced by using a framework, grounded in organizational theory, that considers the dynamic interplay among the processes, structures, culture, environment, and strategies that collectively shape organizational behavior.

This study adopts a systems perspective as a framework to help inform and guide the study of the Consortium as a complex inter-institutional organization. Patton (2002, p. 120) offers three points that lend support to a systems perspective as an appropriate framework to guide a qualitative investigation of the consortium:

1. A systems perspective is becoming increasingly important in dealing with and understanding real-world complexities, viewing things as whole entities embedded in context and still larger wholes.
2. Some approaches to systems research lead directly to and depend heavily on qualitative inquiry.
3. A systems orientation can be very helpful in framing questions, and, later making sense out of qualitative data.

A systems perspective provides a framework from which to view the web of connections that impact organizational systems, as well as a conceptual language useful in understanding the characteristics common to all systems and the dynamic interactions among elements (Hanna, 1988; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Kezar, 2001; Wilson, 1984). A brief overview of the systems perspective follows.

Simply stated, a system is an arrangement of interrelated parts and subsystems that must be considered holistically (Hanna, 1988). Kowszun (1992) elaborates with a definition of a system as “an assemblage of parts viewed as a single entity which maintains its identity under a range of external conditions” (p. 5). In taking a systems approach, one begins by identifying parts--including processes, structures, environmental influences, and strategies--and then seeks to understand the nature of their collective interaction (Hanna, 1988; Kowszun, 1992). Because parts are so interconnected and interdependent, a central tenet in systems thinking is that a change in one part of the system leads to changes among all parts and the system itself (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2001; Morgan, 1997; Patton, 2002).

Organizations can be considered as living, open systems in that they depend upon their external environment to survive (Hanna, 1988; Katz & Kahn, 1978). Therefore, a primary focus of systems thinking is on the extent to which a system is performing in ways acceptable to its environment as the organization imports “inputs” (resources and energy) from the environment, transforms the inputs (through core processes and subsystems), and exports products or services to the external environment. The metaphor associated with open systems--organizations as living systems--expands thinking beyond goals, structures, and efficiencies into the realms of survival, the relationship between the environment and the organization, and issues of effectiveness (Morgan, 1997). Kanter (1994) applies the metaphor to inter-institutional organizations in describing them as “living systems that evolve progressively in their possibilities . . . opening new doors and unforeseen opportunities” (p. 97).

In viewing the Iowa Community College Online Consortium through the systems framework, two intersecting streams of systems inquiry, “logic-based” and “cultural,” (Checkland & Scholes, 1990, p. 27) will be emphasized in addressing the research problem. The two streams of inquiry are intertwined in that both explore issues that influence the capacity of the organization to function, adapt, and survive in a complex, dynamic environment.

A core premise residing within the logic-based dimension of the systems framework is that the multiple parts within an organization can be designed or redesigned to meet specific desired results (Checkland & Scholes, 1990; Smith, 1997). For example, Senge (1990) suggests that systems thinking lends itself to an applied approach in that

knowledge gleaned from the theory can be used to change structure and, in doing so, influence organizational behavior. Similarly, Morgan (1997, p. 42) refers to the importance of establishing congruencies and “alignments” among system elements, with a focus on achieving “good fits” among key business processes, as well as striking a balance between internal needs and external circumstances.

Within the logic-driven stream of inquiry, attention will be placed on the alignment of the consortium’s purpose, mission, goals, strategies, structures, and core processes, with particular attention to the system’s relationships with its external environment. In addition, the organization’s inputs, core processes, outputs, and feedback mechanisms will be examined as they relate to the organization’s effectiveness.

The cultural stream of inquiry recognizes that in considering organizations as living systems, culture is viewed as alive and continually evolving (Morgan, 1997; Schein, 2004). As the components of an organizational system continually interact, people develop distinct beliefs, patterns, and assumptions that can be thought of as organizational culture (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Like the logical stream of inquiry within a systems perspective, an organizational culture approach has implications for effectiveness. According to Tierney (1988, p. 3), diagnosing an organization’s culture, which is “reflected in what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it,” is central in efforts to understand the management and performance of an organization.

Without diminishing the importance of the logical stream’s emphasis on analyzing the structures and natural processes associated with cycles of inputs, transformation, and outputs within a dynamic environment, Tierney (1988) suggests that to fully understand

the performance of an organization, one must also explore how the people within it interpret the web or system in which they exist:

An analysis of organizational culture . . . occurs as if the institution were an interconnected web that cannot be understood unless one looks not only at the structure and natural laws of that web, but also at the actors' interpretation of the web itself. Organizational culture, then, is the study of particular webs of significance within an organizational setting. (p. 4)

While the logical stream examines issues of overall organizational effectiveness in terms of alignment in the strategies, structures, core processes, and the organization's environment, the cultural stream seeks understanding of the socially constructed realities that are in the minds of members. The constructed realities and perceptions can be thought of as "patterns of understanding" that manifest themselves in the notions of shared values, shared beliefs, shared meaning, shared understanding, and shared sense making (Morgan, 1997, p. 138).

The purpose of approaching the case using both the logical and cultural streams of systems inquiry is to provide a more powerful lens from which to investigate, holistically, the key strategic, structural, process, and cultural factors that have impacted the development and operation of the consortium. Viewing and analyzing what takes place in organizations from multiple perspectives is well-suited in efforts to understand complex organizational phenomena (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Kezar, 2001; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Morgan, 1997). Each stream illuminates different aspects of organizational life, and as Hawkins (1997, p. 420) suggests, using multiple lenses to view reality opens the possibility of "rich veins of organizational analysis."

Methodology

The nature of the problem, purpose, research questions, context, and the organizing frameworks collectively support qualitative case study as the most appropriate form of inquiry. The case selected is an organization formed and operated through the process of inter-institutional collaboration. As Stake (1995, p. 133) succinctly states: “The case, in some ways, has a distinct life. It is something that we do not sufficiently understand and want to--therefore we do a case study.”

The purpose of this study is to deepen the understanding of the factors that contribute to the viability of the ICCOC. In other words, in light of the struggles often associated with attempts to collaborate across institutions, I hope to increase the understanding of what makes this collaborative arrangement work. Attempts to understand the factors that contribute to the organization’s viability require an intensive, holistic approach that explores both the logical and cultural characteristics of the Consortium. Multiple procedures will be used to collect data, including semi-structured interviews, document review, and observations. Ongoing analysis will take place as the data is collected, with content analysis and constant comparisons used to identify patterns, themes, and/or categories that help illuminate the case (Patton, 2002). Details about the research design are provided in Chapter 3.

Parameters

The purpose of the inquiry is to describe factors contributing to the success of one collaborative organization through a single case study. As such, there are limitations on the degree to which information gleaned from this research may be generalized to other

situations and contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The issue of generalizability will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Interviews will focus on members of the administrative group, the Oversight Committee, that oversee the planning and operation of the ICCOC, and others who emerge as key informants as the study progresses. The Oversight Committee is comprised of two or three representatives from each of the seven colleges. While these individuals have direct involvement in the planning, decision-making, and administration of the consortium, their views may not represent the perspectives of everyone involved.

It should also be noted that collaboration is an emerging process (Gray, 1989), and the dynamic nature of systems suggests that data collected at the time of the study represents the researcher's interpretation of the organization as it exists at a particular point. Similarly, since culture may be best considered as the ongoing process of "organizing and negotiating meaning," (Hawkins, 1997, p. 424) it should be acknowledged that beliefs, patterns, and assumptions are likely to evolve and change over time.

Definition of Terms

Terms used in this study include:

Distance Education – planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements (Moore & Kearsley, 1996, p. 2).

Collaboration – occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 140).

Consortium – a semi-permanent organization, typically supported largely by financial contributions from its members, that employs a professional staff whose sole responsibility is to encourage and to facilitate cooperative activities between and among the members, and between them collectively and others (Neal, 1988, p. 2).

Significance of the Study

Despite the prominence of the issue, little in-depth research has been conducted in the field of inter-institutional collaboration, in particular, in the context of distance education. Through discovery, explanation, and interpretation, this research should help increase understanding of the factors that are instrumental in operating and sustaining one successful distance learning consortium.

A number of audiences--including administrators, governing boards, and those involved in the planning and daily operation of collaborative ventures--have an interest in gaining a deeper understanding of the organizational factors that contribute to the success of distance education consortia. Trist (1989) suggests that, although progress has been made toward the recognition of the value of collaboration at the appreciative level, too little has been done at the practical level. It is hoped that an in-depth case study of a viable distance learning consortium may provide information from which others may be able to draw inferences to help guide decision making and practice. Given the well-documented problems and barriers associated with creating and sustaining

inter-institutional efforts, the ICCOC seems to represent a case from which something of value can be learned.

As financial, competitive, stakeholder, and political pressures continue to bear down on colleges and universities, the pursuit of inter-institutional relationships as a competitive strategy will likely continue. With a market for online education estimated at \$7 billion in 2003 that is not projected to plateau for the foreseeable future (Moe, 2000), coupled with pressures on institutions to become both more competitive and more efficient (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999; Offerman 1997), the incentives to explore collaborative offerings are powerful. Colleges and universities able to navigate the difficult waters of inter-institutional collaboration may be rewarded with increased enrollments, revenues, influence, and competitiveness.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Following the advice of Yin (2003a, p. 3), the intent with this chapter is “to place the case study in an appropriate research literature, so that lessons from the case study will be more likely to advance knowledge and understanding of a given topic.” This suggestion is particularly important, given Moore’s (2003) conclusion that much of what is presented as research in the field of distance education today consists of data that have no connection with what is already known--reflecting a pattern of “an impatience for moving into action without adequate comprehension of previous experience” (p. x). With this point in mind, the first part of this review of literature provides an overview of the broader context which envelops collaborative distance education efforts. Next, I describe several themes that emerged in a review of the literature addressing inter-institutional collaboration that help inform this inquiry, including basic concepts in inter-institutional collaboration, the potential benefits, barriers and problems, pre-conditions, and general suggestions for success. I conclude Chapter 2 with an overview of systems thinking.

Academic interest in inter-institutional collaboration reaches across many contexts and incorporates research from several fields of study. This chapter draws upon literature examining inter-organizational collaboration in business, non-profit organizations, adult and continuing education settings and, when available, research specific to distance education. Despite the interest among colleges and universities in pursuing inter-organizational efforts, it appears little has changed since Offerman (1985) concluded that,

while effort has been put forth in generating suggestions about how to successfully collaborate, there has been almost no research conducted in this regard. In particular, little in-depth research has been conducted that explores examples of successful inter-organizational collaboration in the context of distance education.

The Context of Distance Education Collaboration

Advancing the understanding of inter-institutional distance education collaboration as a possible organizational strategy requires situating efforts in the broader context of higher education. A degree of change has always been a part of the educational landscape, but Schuster (2002) notes a difference in the current milieu with his observation: “It is hard to quarrel with Heraclitus’ dictum that the only constant is change; indeed, higher education, like all else, is always in flux. But never have so many variables been in motion at the same time” (p. viii). As many as fourteen distinct pressures are bearing down on institutions (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2002), the cumulative effect of which has created what some have referred to as “the most challenging period in the history of higher education” (Oblinger et al., 2001, p. 1).

At the nexus of the various economic, political, social, and technological forces churning within the present context, the phenomenon of distance education epitomizes the pressures of change impacting colleges and universities. It is important to note, however, that distance education is hardly new to the landscape of higher education. The roots of collegiate distance education have been traced to asynchronous independent study courses offered by Illinois Wesleyan in 1873 and to the comprehensive correspondence study program initiated by William Rainey Harper at the University of Chicago in the 1890s

(Pittman, 2001). Over the next century, the non-traditional delivery of college course work expanded to include radio, newspapers, telephone bridges, and television broadcasts as modalities aimed at increasing access for students who could not attend class on-campus. It has been over the last decade that distance education--once considered a "poor and often unwelcome stepchild" within the higher education community (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999, p. 7)--has been propelled by the advent of the World Wide Web and other digital technologies from the fringes of academia to the mainstream (Carchidi, 2002; Carchidi & Peterson, 2000; Hurst, 2001; Moore, 2003; Moran & Myringer, 1999).

The academic apathy and skepticism associated with early attempts at non-traditional delivery of university courses and programs have given way to a generally positive outlook of distance learning's efficacy from both administrators (Allen & Seaman, 2003) and faculty members (National Education Association, 2000; Rubiales, Steely, Wollner, Richardson, & Smith, 1998). Recent surveys detailing the growth in the supply and demand for distance education offerings suggest a similar degree of acceptance at the institutional level and from students. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), in 1997-1998 almost 44 percent of all higher education institutions offered for-credit courses via distance education to 1.344 million students (Lewis, Snow, Farris, & Levin, 1999). By 2000-2001, the rate of participation of institutions offering distance learning programs increased to 56 percent, with the number of students more than doubling to 2.876 million (Waits & Lewis, 2003). In addition, the number of distance education courses and programs is expected to grow at a rate of nearly 20 percent for the foreseeable future (Allen & Seaman, 2003). Beyond the facts and

figures documenting levels of participation, there is a substantial body of research supporting the case that learning via distance education can be both effective and satisfying for students (Newman & Scurry, 2001; Schlosser & Anderson, 1994). Given the current trends, attitudes of administrators and faculty, interest from students, and institutional goals, it is difficult to fathom a future of higher education in which distance education does not occupy an important place at the institutional core of most colleges and universities.

From elite universities, such as Harvard and Stanford, to for-profit institutions, like the University of Phoenix and Capella University, a wide range of institutions have engaged in efforts to capture a share of the increasingly competitive, burgeoning market for online education. In particular, public institutions have gravitated toward providing education opportunities via digital technologies, with approximately 90 percent of public two-year colleges and four-year institutions active in the arena of distance education (Allen & Seaman, 2003). Driven by dual concerns about competition from institutions from outside their borders and interest in improving access to educational opportunities, at least 45 states have created a virtual university or other statewide organization to deliver or promote distance education (Epper & Garn, 2003). While the majority of distance learning enrollments continue to be associated with traditional institutions (Twigg, 2003), a variety of alliances, partnerships, consortiums, and new organizational forms have emerged in response to environmental changes associated with the proliferation of digitally delivered courses and programs (Bates, 2000; Carchidi & Peterson, 2000; Eckel et al., 2003; Hanna, 2003; Katz et al., 2002; Twigg, 2003). Clearly,

the marketplace has become increasingly complex as lines have blurred between public and private, for-profit and not-for-profit, and a variety of entrepreneurial models in between (Gladieux & Swail, 1999).

Responses to the sweeping changes in the marketplace of higher education span a broad range of ideas and perspectives. At one extreme, pundits, like Peter Drucker, have predicted that distance learning technologies, in Darwinistic fashion, will bring about the demise of the traditional residential model of higher education within a few decades (Blustain, Goldstein, & Lozier, 1999; Kenzner & Johnson, 1997). Others view the proliferation of distance education programs, driven by powerful market forces, as “undermining the soul” of higher education (Newman, 2000, p. 16) or as evidence of a new “Drive-Thru-U” model for universities characterized by no campus or intellectual life (Traub, 1997, p. 114).

Concerns about the negative effects of the commercialization of higher education and the notion of academic capitalism have been common themes in the distance education literature (Berg, 2002; Twitchell, 2004; Weigel, 2000). Institutions engaged in distance learning efforts frequently seem motivated by a desire for quick cash or by fear, rather than by educational vision (Creighton & Buchanan, 2001). The long-term impact of “mission creep,” prompted by financial opportunism, may well alter the fabric of higher education as a whole. For example, Bok (2003, p.B7) cautioned against “corrosive pressures” in higher education that result from the temptation to undertake questionable commercial ventures in the quest for additional revenues. Central to Bok’s concern is that when a few institutions enter into suspect behaviors, pressure mounts on others to follow

suit, and what was previously considered unacceptable practice soon becomes acceptable. In interviews with college presidents, faculty members, and state legislators, Immerwahr (2002) identified dual concerns regarding the new competition made possible by digital technologies. One worry is that new competitors, especially for-profits, will “cherry pick” the most profitable programs, leaving public institutions with only the high cost, least profitable operations. A related fear is that traditional higher education institutions, finding themselves squeezed by finances and competition, will be forced to emulate the for-profits and “shed much of their public mission” (Immerwahr, 2002, p. 11).

Another vantage point, however, celebrates the liberation of students from archaic, instructor-centered classrooms toward a more appropriate, learner-centered paradigm made possible by distance learning technologies (Duderstadt, 1999). Though more reserved in their assessment, a subcommittee of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) stated: “Distance learning, used properly in its various modes, can enhance the learning experience and increase access to higher education for a wide variety of potential students” (Rubiales et al., 1998, p. 30). Others have concluded that while distance education technologies shatter barriers of time and space, they are also likely to create new barriers and inequities, deepening the divide between educational haves and have-nots (Gladieux & Swail, 1999). Westera and Sloep (2001, p. 115) reflected a degree of balance with their perspective that while “cybereducation” holds promises for students in the form of more freedom, more resources, more diversity, and more flexibility, educators must exercise vigilance to avoid the dehumanization of education.

Regardless of whether distance education is viewed as a force of destruction or liberation, or something in between, a compelling case can be made the system of higher education is in “the grip of transforming change” (Newman, 2002, p. 1). Central among the forces underlying the transformation are rapid advancements in new information technologies, the diffusion of technology into the public domain, and their rippling effects on all aspects of education. In the new, dynamic “marketspace” of higher education, the space of the virtual world presents increasing challenges to the historical dominance of physical place, while providing the capacity to create new ways of teaching and learning (Heterick & Twigg, 1999; Newman, 2002).

As the convenience of virtual education permeates the expectations of both traditional and non-traditional students (Newman & Couturier, 2002), colleges and universities must recognize a shift is occurring in which students, not institutions, will increasingly set the agenda for higher education (Levine, 2000; Olcott & Schmidt, 2000). In the free-trade zone of distance education, students, many of whom are willing to “spend money to save time” (Beaudoin, 2003), are afforded the power and capacity to comparison shop among the curricula, services, price, and convenience of hundreds of colleges, universities, and for-profit companies that offer online courses and degree programs.

The rules of engagement have changed dramatically as the insulation provided by geographic and regulatory factors has evaporated, and the historically placid environment of higher education has been battered about by the confluence of competition, technology, and consumer demands (Beaudoin, 2002). As a result of the profound changes in the

context of higher education, Le Grew (as cited in Bates, 2000, p. 7) suggested that many postsecondary institutions “are moving to reconstruct their infrastructure, redesign policy, and realign external relationships to gain comparative advantage.” Clearly, efforts to collaborate inter-institutionally in developing and delivering distance education programs reflect a purposeful strategy aimed at maintaining and/or increasing competitiveness in the riled context of higher education.

Concepts in Inter-Institutional Collaboration

Chapter 1 introduced the idea that collaboration with other organizations provides a potential antidote to a turbulent environment by building collective capacity to respond to changing economic, technological, and financial conditions (Gray, 1996). In addition, Chapter 1 outlined some benefits associated with inter-institutional collaboration and described a persistent pattern of difficulty in accruing them. The lack of research in the field was identified as a contributing factor in the gap between the potential and the reality of collaborative activities. At this juncture, it makes sense to describe ideas and themes that emerged from a review of literature that help to illuminate the key concepts involved in collaborative efforts, as well as locate this study in previous work in the field.

To begin, it is important to acknowledge the terminology associated with inter-institutional relationships has been characterized by a great deal of confusion and variation (Huxom, 1996; Winer & Ray, 1994; Wood & Gray, 1991). Much of the confusion stems from the fact that the terms collaboration, cooperation, and coordination are often used interchangeably. In efforts to clarify misunderstandings, Donaldson and Kozoll (1999) noted that many types of inter-institutional partnerships exist, and they can

be classified based on their purpose, level of intensity, and degree of formality, as well as on the basis of whether they are mandated or voluntary, and the degree to which the participating organizations are interdependent. As an example, institutions may cooperate voluntarily in the delivery of a one-time educational event with an effort characterized as a short-term, informal relationship that involves little risk and a minimal amount of intensity and interdependence. In contrast, on a continuum of cooperation among institutions, collaboration represents the highest form of interdependence, or “in-depth commitment” (Glowacki-Dudka, 1999, p. 8), as well as the greatest level of intensity as reflected in the risks, time needed, and opportunities involved (Winer & Ray, 1994).

Similarly, Gray (1989, p. 11) identified five characteristics that help differentiate inter-institutional collaboration from other types of inter-institutional efforts. These characteristics help frame issues central in attempts to understand both the barriers and benefits associated with collaborative endeavors. First, interdependence among stakeholders suggests that the give and take among stakeholders produces solutions that institutions working independently could not achieve. Second, dealing constructively with differences can be a source of creative potential. Third, as a result of joint ownership of decisions, participants engaged in collaborative efforts share the responsibility for setting the agenda for the organization and reaching agreement. Fourth, stakeholders collectively negotiate relationships that govern interactions which address the future of the group’s domain. Finally, collaboration is an emergent process, rather than a prescribed state of organization.

The definition of collaboration receives a great deal of attention in the literature. Winer and Ray (1994) defined collaboration as “a mutually beneficial and well-defined relationship entered into by two or more organizations to achieve results they are more likely to achieve together” (p. 24). As indicated in Chapter 1, the definition derived by Wood and Gray (1991, p. 146) informs this study: “Collaboration occurs when a group of autonomous stakeholders of a problem domain engage in an interactive process, using shared rules, norms, and structures, to act or decide on issues related to that domain.” However, Cropper’s (1996) description of the diverse, complex nature of collaborative arrangements, including the notion of a collective purpose, as well as the fact that parent institutions tend to preserve a degree of independence, is instructive as well:

Collaboration implies a positive, purposive relationship between organizations that retain autonomy, integrity and distinct identity, and thus, the potential to withdraw from the relationship. Between the extremes of independence and fusion, the spectrum of structural form from which collaboration falls is nevertheless wide. It ranges from wide networks through loose alliances and tight federations to the creation of novel entities, sometimes separate from the partner organizations, sometimes vested in one partner. In terms of texture rather than structure, collaboration is a distinct mode of organizing. (p. 82)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, inter-institutional collaboration has been discussed in a wide variety of contexts. In this case study, the focus is on exploring the dynamics of a distance learning consortium--a special type of collaboration that takes the form of an organization in which educational activities are exclusively directed to distance education (Mark, 1990). Consortia have features that distinguish them from other types of collaborative relationships. As formal, relatively permanent organizations, consortia are characterized by the provision of integrated programs and services, a

separate identity, voluntary membership, permanent staff, fiscal autonomy, and membership at the institutional level (Lang, 2002). Consortia also possess the “sole responsibility to encourage and facilitate cooperative activities between and among members, and between them collectively and others” (Neal, 1988, pp. 1-2) and represent a more ambitious approach to sharing resources and more interdependence among institutions (Bergquist et al., 1995).

An important feature of consortia involves their overarching reason for existence. According to Baus and Ramsbottom (1999), academic consortia form for one primary reason: to serve their member institutions. As discussed in the section that follows, inter-institutional collaborations, including consortia, may potentially serve participating organizations by generating a number of benefits.

Benefits of Inter-institutional Collaboration

Broadly speaking, successful inter-institutional collaborations offer potential benefits to participants that include cost savings, increased capacities, risk reduction, political advantage, and new synergies (Austin, 2000). This set of benefits and the ways in which they generate competitive advantages for participants in collaborative distance education efforts are described in further detail in the below.

Cost Savings

Developing, delivering, and supporting distance education programs are costly endeavors. The technical and administrative structures must be created and maintained, faculty must be retained to develop and teach courses, and support services must be provided to students. Many universities report they have encountered costs greater than

expected in distance education initiatives and tend to hover close to the financial break-even point (Carr, 2001). Due to the investments required, the primary challenge in generating new courses and programs has been the lack of adequate human resources (faculty, instructional designers, and technical support staff), financial resources, and technical resources for curriculum and course development (Fleming, Tammone & Wahl, 2002). Because program development costs have been viewed as a major factor in preventing institutions from starting or expanding distance learning offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2003), inter-institutional collaboration offers a potentially promising strategy in facilitating the development of new courses and programs. By pooling resources and achieving economies of scale through collaboration, institutions that work together can achieve a competitive edge over those acting alone (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Given the nature of the increasingly competitive environment, it comes as little surprise that sharing costs and reducing the impact of competition for students have been identified as the two most important reasons for creating consortia (Bates, 2000).

Increased Capacities and Risk Reduction

In addition to the financial benefits associated with sharing resources, pooling administrative and instructional talent among institutions can increase capacity to create educational opportunities that would not have been possible by individual institutions working alone, while reducing the risks associated with new initiatives. Carchidi and Peterson (2000) explain:

Postsecondary education institutions are recognizing that all of the resources needed to create innovative educational products may not be available within their organization (e.g., an internal network). Such institutions may intentionally create

partnerships with the express purpose of assembling the resources necessary to offer a new and distinctive educational product. In stable networks, individuals and units collaborate and often share the risk to achieve a particular outcome of mutual benefit to each partner. (p. 4)

For institutions faced with the problems of having too few resources to develop specific programs or an unwillingness to take on the risks involved should a program fail, engaging in partnerships with other institutions may be the only avenue to make specific distance education offerings viable (Bishop, 2003; Morgan, 2000; Paul, 1990). As an example, in response to a shortage of Ph.D.s in Technology Management, nine universities formed a distance education consortium and, by combining resources and expertise, were able to offer a specialized program that would not have been possible without collaboration (Anderson & Siebold, 1998).

Beyond increased capacities to create courses and programs, effective collaboration can improve the capacity to provide quality support services to students. Offerman (1985) identified the desire to improve services as a motivating force in the creation of continuing education consortia. While institutions have made strides in collaborating in the academic arena, providing comprehensive support services to distance learning students presents a critical problem for colleges and universities engaged in distance learning (Fleming et al., 2002; Phipps & Merisotis, 2000; Phipps, Wellman, & Merisotis, 1998; Rinear, 2003; Saba, Shearer, & Haakenson, 2002). One of the key strategies in addressing this problem is to collaborate in local, statewide, or regional consortia, task forces, and work groups to develop integrated support services for distance learners (McCracken, 2002).

Political Advantages

From a political frame of reference, collaboration is viewed as means of increasing or preserving power and influence. One of the potentially positive outcomes of inter-institutional collaboration is the degree to which the efforts increase influence over other organizations, broader inter-organizational relationships, and the context in which they exist (Hardy et al., 2003). At the domain level, participants can collectively exert a more powerful influence on policies and events related to the group's overarching problem than is possible through individual action. For example, distance education consortia can present a united front in lobbying for legislative action, such as changing financial aid guidelines, or in making a joint request for external funding to support collaborative programming.

A second political dimension deals with the impact of collaborative activities on broader stakeholder perceptions of the participants. The public relations aspect of cooperative distance education programming has become especially important within the current climate in which "accountability for performance" has been identified as today's mantra in higher education (Wellman & Ehlich, 2003). Collaboration among higher education institutions is viewed as especially critical, given the dual problems of limited public financing and concerns about the U.S. having too few college educated workers to compete in a global economy (Conklin & Reindl, 2004). In addition, collaborative activities among institutions have considerable appeal to governing boards and legislators who are interested in reducing unnecessary duplication and lowering costs to students and taxpayers (Association of American Universities, 1998; Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999; Paul,

1990). Board members and policy makers for some institutions expect their institutions to be front-runners in all ways--including collaborative ventures--and few institutions wish to be perceived as standing still (Eckel et al., 2003).

New Synergies

Assembling a group of talented people from different organizations who share interest in addressing a problem can result in creative energy, new ideas, and solutions. In the process of creating value and competitive advantage, Bergquist et al. (1995) suggested collaborative partnerships influence the ways in which people work together and perceive each other. A track record of successful programming and the experience of positive collegial relationships not only helps to sustain the formal connection (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999), the creation of a “collaborative mindset”--a belief and confidence in the efficacy of collaboration to produce benefits--can spill over into other activities (Glowacki-Dudka, 1999).

The potential for non-financial benefits of collaboration is evident in a recent comment by the president of Augsburg, a small liberal arts college in Minnesota, in which he suggested the outcome of the recently formed partnership with a for-profit college includes not only an increase in revenues, but also an opportunity for “culture change” within the college (Carlson, 2003b, p. A21). As another example, Kaufman (1991) noted that the interaction with others in alliances may help organizations to bypass cultural prohibitions against potentially productive ideas and practices previously considered as heretical.

The opportunity for “joint learning,” especially critical given the rapid pace of technological innovation, presents another potentially valuable outcome of collaboration (Alter & Hage, 1993, p. 269). In contrast to strategic benefits associated with clear goals, specific control mechanisms, and clearly defined relationships, the organizational learning frame emphasizes an outcome of knowledge creation as the result of ongoing, synergistic partnering (Powell, Koput, & Smith-Doer, 1996). According to Hardy et al. (2003), knowledge is more than an inert resource that can be transferred from organization to organization; rather, “new knowledge grows out of the sort of ongoing social interaction that occurs in ongoing collaborations” (p. 326).

Barriers and Problems

The literature provides a long list of potential problems and barriers that cut across a wide spectrum of organizational, political, cultural, and human issues (Kanter, 1994). One limitation in considering the literature outlining the problems, barriers, and constraints associated with inter-institutional efforts is that much of the writing about the topic has been based on experience, rather than research (Offerman, 1985). For example, Verduin and Clark (1991), wrote that “anyone with experience in collaboration between educational institutions, particularly ones in higher education, can attest to the inherent problems of a consortium” (p. 176). Similarly, Baus and Ramsbottom (1999) stated that “experience shows that consortia do not form and survive easily” (p. 4). Nonetheless, the consistency with which the themes appear in the literature suggests that information based on the experiences of those familiar with inter-institutional collaboration may be useful in understanding why collaborative efforts seem more likely than not to fail.

Not surprisingly, many of the barriers and problems associated with inter-institutional collaboration have been attributed to fundamental differences in the expectations, aims, structures, processes, and cultures among partners. Daniel and Mason (2001) captured this essence with their contention that the biggest obstacle to successful partnering is the need for each participant to come to terms with the other partner “who is inevitably marching to a different drum” (p. 57). Organizational differences across a number of different dimensions create tension and generate potential points of conflict, and as a result, the process of reaching agreement on seemingly simple tasks and decisions can become complicated, time-consuming and, in some cases, impossible.

Differing Expectations

Glowacki-Dudka (1999, p. 24) described “developmental tensions” among partners that result from different expectations related to risk and effectiveness. Substantial gaps between what each partner is willing to invest and what they expect as the payoff jeopardize the process. In general, Oblinger (2001) identified the tendency for educational institutions to avoid risks, often for good cause, as an obstacle in creating distance education partnerships. According to Gray (1989), differences in perceptions of the risks involved in collaborative efforts result in diverging conceptions of problems and solution preferences. Divergent tolerances for the risks associated with collaborative distance education ventures can undermine efforts to reach agreement on fundamental issues needed to make collaborations work.

Paul (1990) suggested that collaborative schemes, especially those set up quickly in reaction to external pressures, are prone to be fuzzy with intentions and likely to mean

different things to different parties. The likelihood of experiencing tensions that result from disparate expectations and meanings associated with collaborative efforts is bound to increase as the number of partners expands. Paul (1990) captures the notion of compounding complexities with his observation that “the difficulty of managing a consortium increases exponentially with every new partner” (p. 148).

In addition, participants in collaborative ventures may not be forthright with their true beliefs, values, and differences of opinion about the efforts. Offerman (1987) quoted one former consortium director’s assessment:

Consortia all too frequently serve as a way to avoid or appease real cooperation. People wear a label on their chest that says ‘I belong to a consortium so I cooperate.’ This avoids the real nitty-gritty horsework that needs to occur. (p. 137)

In many cases, inter-institutional collaboration is perceived as perfunctory, providing “cover” to member institutions who seek relief from political pressures (Twigg, 2003). Masked intentions, hidden agendas, and glossed over differences on the part of one or more participants can impair the ability of a collaborative group in making constructive progress.

Disparities in Power

The degree to which healthy, constructive relationships are formed among individuals and organizations largely determines the efficacy of inter-organizational efforts. Relationships may be undermined or bolstered by the politics of power that are a natural part of everyday organizational life and processes (Bolman & Deal, 1997). The

pivotal role that negotiations play in inter-organizational efforts suggests that political conflicts can present serious obstacles in forming the relationships necessary for success.

Perceived imbalances in power represent a potential barrier to collaboration and amplify the potential for misunderstandings (Gray, 1989; Huxom, 1996). Institutions that believe their interests will be deemed secondary, or perceive they are at a disadvantage to adequately represent their interests, will be reluctant to collaborate. In reference to differences in perceived status among distance education consortium members, Twigg (2003) suggested that issues of academic turf and the like can usually be worked out among institutions that view one another as peers, but quoted one participant's view of a commonly encountered problem when status differences exist: "Lord help the poor status-inferior college that attempts to work with one of the big boys" (p. 6).

Differences in Organizational Culture

Organizations possess different histories, values, norms, customs, stories, rituals, communications patterns, and "ways of doing things" that can result in a clash of cultures as efforts at collaboration take place. In addition, a degree of conflict is inevitable as collaborations form new cultures distinct from home-based institutions (Glowacki-Dudka, 1999; Winer & Ray, 1994). For example, organizations have different preferences with respect to decision-making, a central element in organizational culture (Tierney, 1988). Some institutional cultures value deliberate, cautious decision-making in which input is solicited from everyone; others prefer quick debate and decisive action. When significant differences exist in cultural backgrounds of the partners, or pre-conceived stereotypes of

other participating institutions prevents the development of agreed upon social norms, inter-institutional relationships are likely to fail (Palmer, 1996).

In addition, historical baggage and ideological differences can present problems for fledgling efforts to collaborate. Organizations and their members carry forth both positive and negative experiences from previous encounters and relationships. If past experiences are marked by adversarial interactions or deep ideological differences, insurmountable obstacles to collaboration might result (Gray, 1989).

The nature of collaboration involves change for individuals, groups, and parent organizations. Resistance to change is a predictable part of organizational life. Differences are likely among institutions with respect to tolerance for ambiguity and the degree of internal resistance to change. The tensions that result from these differences must be managed openly and honestly to reduce conflict -- a notion easier said than done. For example, in describing barriers to collaborative efforts, Freeman (1981, p. 146) identified a phenomenon, "ritual declarations of friendship," that masks hidden agendas, while spawning non-productive negotiations that can delay, sometimes indefinitely, the processes and structural changes necessary for success.

Structural Issues

Organizational structure includes how work responsibilities are assigned, the assignment of responsibility and accountability to positions, a reward system, the establishment of policies and procedures, and the distribution of resources (Creth, 2000). Structural obstacles and problems in inter-institutional collaborations can arise from issues of organizational configuration, time, and funding policies (Glowacki-Dudka,

1999). Seemingly simple matters such as different budget cycles in home institutions (Gray, 1989) and different semester schedules (Rayburn & Ramaprasad, 2000) can create problems and impede progress.

Tensions stemming from issues of autonomy, accountability, and a lack of authority can create barriers and problems (Huxom, 1996, pp. 4-5). For example, if individuals engaged in collaborative efforts lack the authority to make commitments on behalf of their parent organizations, progress can quickly stall. The fact that normal subordinate-superordinate relationships do not apply across institutions poses another potential structural problem. Instead of the usual lines of authority and hierarchy that ensure tasks and work are completed, inter-organizational work is typically accomplished through relationships that are formed on a “goodwill” basis (Huxom, 1996). Limerick and Cunnington (1993) referred to the dualistic nature of relationships as loosely coupled, meaning that through collaboration each partner simultaneously asserts autonomy and distinctiveness, as well as interdependence and responsiveness to other organizations.

The issue of time, or lack thereof, has been identified as an impediment to collaborative activities. Gray (1989) identified two facets of time that can present obstacles to inter-institutional collaboration: actual time invested in achieving mutual understanding and gaining goodwill and the lapsed time required to cope with operational issues. If the work load associated with inter-institutional collaboration is perceived as a drain on time and resources, the resentment that is sure to follow can detract from efforts. Even in situations in which commitment to the collaboration exists, a lack of time available for participants to meet, plan, resolve disagreements, and handle the technical

complexities of the organization presents a logistical challenge. Time is also a factor if momentum is lost in the traditional, bureaucratic processes of the home institutions. For example, Farrell (2001, p. 73) suggested the “glacial speed” of curriculum change may create a barrier in inter-institutional collaboration--a particular impediment in situations in which new programs must be approved through traditional systems of curricular review.

Autonomy and Individualism

As component of the larger societal milieu, universities reflect a strong cultural norm in the U.S. that views competition and autonomy favorably and collaboration with skepticism (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999; Gray, 1989). Offerman (1997, p. 32) stated that, “for collaboration to be successful, it helps to recognize the competition imbedded in our attitudes, values, and rewards,” while Neal (1988) goes so far as to suggest that “interinstitutional cooperation is not a natural form of behavior” (p. 198). The tension between the historical patterns of independence among colleges and universities and the interdependence required in collaborative efforts is an oft mentioned obstacle to inter-institutional collaboration. For example, Neal (1988) argued that the baggage inherent in our cultural affinity towards competition, coupled with the voluntary nature of collaboration, present a significant barrier to inter-institutional collaboration:

Asking an administrator at one college or university to cooperate with counterparts from other higher education institutions is asking something that is alien to the attitudes and values absorbed since birth. One reason, then, that consortia have not flourished in the higher education community is that they run counter to the grain of higher education. Competition is a given; cooperation is a variable that one can accept or reject. (p. 194)

A paradox exists with the phenomena of distance education in that the same digital technologies that provide capacity for institutions to collaborate across regions also make it easier to compete and vice versa. Despite the set of potential advantages associated with collaborative efforts, Twigg (2003) pointed out the roots of competition continue to run deep and the desire to maintain institutional autonomy is a powerful force:

A major strength and a major weakness of America's higher education institutions is their independent competitiveness. Some have characterized the business of higher education in America as a cottage industry. After all, there are nearly 4,000 institutions. By definition, they do not thrive on cooperation and collaboration. Autonomy, perception of quality, and competition for students and for resources, to name a few, are factors that are deeply ingrained in the culture of higher education. (p. 6)

Farrell (2001) suggested the perception that partnerships will undermine autonomy and quality presents another potential barrier to inter-institutional collaboration. Concerns about losing identity can be a powerful countervailing force to promise of value-added through collaboration, and as such, a "pervasive wariness" exists that hampers integration and information sharing (Bryant, 2003, p. 11). Similarly, Olcott and Schmidt (2000) described a competitive mindset and the tendency to view programs from other colleges with skepticism as factors that undermine efforts at collaboration:

Ask five business colleges to collaborate and they will say "yes." Ask them who has the best program and each will tell you it is theirs. Collaborative intent turns to competitive elitism. The point is that universities are highly competitive with their own sister institutions, which often blinds them to new market realities and competition. (p. 269)

As a result of deeply rooted values of competition and autonomy, institutions and their members tend to expend efforts first and foremost on their own core activities. As such, the tendency for colleges and universities to act in ways that preserve autonomy by

concentrating on internal, rather than external systems, presents a significant obstacle in developing and operating inter-institutional partnerships (Duin et al., 2001). In particular, if partners fail to attend to the external aspects of managing the collaborative enterprise, the results will reflect the neglect. Effectively organizing and administering distance is a difficult enterprise within the boundaries of individual colleges and universities. If problems related to the organization and administration of distance learning plague single campuses, they are even more severe in collaborative programs (Paulsen, 2002).

Verduin and Clark (1991) offered a concise reality check for those considering inter-institutional collaboration with their conclusion that consortia “appear to be viable for the administration of distance education,” but problems can exist that cause efforts to be “fragile at best and ineffective in carrying out their missions” (p. 176). As outlined previously, the primary problems associated with inter-institutional collaboration involve differences in the domains of expectations, power, and culture, as well as the tendency by colleges and universities to value competition and autonomy. In short, even for institutions that share similar interests in addressing a particular problem, the complexities and challenges inherent in collaborating in the arena of distance education often make success an illusive goal.

Preconditions for Collaboration

In response to the barriers, problems, and failures associated with inter-institutional efforts, the literature provides a number of general sets of suggestions--typically presented as preconditions, antecedents, and readiness factors--that focus attention helping organizations assess, upfront, the feasibility of pursuing specific

endeavors. Inherent in these sets of conditions is the assumption that investing time and effort in assessing fit among partners increases the likelihood of success, while cutting down on the resources unnecessarily expended on projects that are unlikely to endure.

The need to ensure alignment in the mission, goals, values, and resources of prospective partners is a recurrent theme in describing the conditions necessary to pursue collaborative efforts. For example, Austin (2000, p. 62) suggested that institutions should begin with development of a “partnership purpose and fit statement” that flows from answering the following series of questions individually and then comparing their respective answers with potential partners to determine compatibility:

1. What are you trying to accomplish through the collaboration?
2. Where does your mission overlap with potential partner’s missions?
3. Do you and potential partners share an interest in a common group of people?
4. Do your needs match up with your partner’s capabilities, and vice versa?
5. Would the collaboration contribute significantly to your overall strategy?

In addition to alignment among the mission, interests, and capabilities, commitment and support for collaborative endeavors must be evident at all levels of the organization. Focusing specifically on partnerships in a distance education context, Duin et al. (2001, p. 66) identified five key “readiness” criteria that focused primarily on the “will” and support within institutions to pursue such efforts: (a) leadership committed to the project, (b) commitment to learner-centered education, (c) climate to support partnership and change, (d) alignment of key decision makers, and (e) buy-in by faculty, departments, and academic colleges.

Similarly, Katz et al. (2002, p. 12) outlined five ambitious principles they consider essential in developing and sustaining successful distance education partnerships:

1. The partnership is a top priority for all entities involved in it.
2. All partners recognize speed in decision making, in action, and in market delivery as core values.
3. The partnership agreement incorporates and memorializes elements that originate from different partners. The agreement truly captures the consensus of the partners and serves as a touchstone for numerous downstream implementation decisions and actions.
4. Personnel are well-prepared, and membership in the core project team is stable. Customer and employee impact drive decision making.
5. Efforts to integrate operations, marketing, and processes are aligned with the broader partnership intentions, expectations, and motivations.

Given the host of difficulties that can arise when participants fail to select potential partners wisely with respect to compatible goals, appropriate capacity, and desire to provide necessary resources (Eckel et al., 2003), this strand in the literature offers planners a potentially useful set of considerations as they weigh the pros and cons of moving forward with collaborative ventures.

Factors Associated with Failed Efforts

In efforts to enhance understanding of unsuccessful attempts at inter-institutional collaboration, a number of writers have offered post-mortem analyses of failed efforts. For example, in a case study of three terminated consortia involving university continuing

education outreach, Offerman (1987) identified the following set of factors that contributed to their demise:

1. Funding policy. The lack of membership contributions to sustain the consortia was identified as the most immediate cause of terminations. As a result, goals related to member or constituent needs were displaced by short-term attempts to secure funding.
2. Institutional commitment and support. In the failed efforts, little ownership existed for the consortium efforts; rather, membership appeared to be measured with respect to the amount of advantage to be gained with little or no investment.
3. Mission clarity and articulation. None of the terminated consortia clearly established and articulated mission and goals. When goals were established, they were not articulated. According to Offerman (1987, p. 138): "Repeatedly, faculty and administrators complained about a lack of direction and a sense that they were brought together for no obvious reason. Many agendas were discussed but discussion superseded action."
4. Organizational structure. Coupled with the lack of mission clarity, the consortia lacked appropriate structures that contributed to confused roles, poor communication, and a lack of unity in efforts.
5. Effectiveness. Member institutions viewed each of the failed consortia as ineffective.

6. Leadership. Weak leadership, ambiguous commitments, and board members more interested in monitoring and restricting, rather than leading and refining, contributed to the demise of the consortiums.
7. Institutionalization. Concerns about the loss of autonomy, perceptions of competition or duplication, and the unwillingness of institutions to allow consortia to define a domain of their own in which to operate were factors in the decision to abandon efforts.
8. Community Support. A lack of community support was evident, particularly when the existence of the consortia were threatened.
9. Member Complementarity. Dissonance was evident in terms of perceived status, resource wealth, levels of commitment, and benefits from the partnership. In addition, dissimilar organizations complicated cooperation and adversely impacted levels of commitment.

In a more recent description of factors contributing to the demise of collaborative distance education initiatives, Katz et al. (2002) identified the following:

1. Loss of champions. If a dynamic leader leaves, organization inertia can fill the void, leaving partnerships without energy and vision.
2. Disagreement over the distribution of returns (or losses). Disagreements about the allocation of assets, as well as intellectual properties, can cause problems.
3. Inadequate financial due diligence. Given the potential for downturns, returns on investment are not always forthcoming, and partners risk being left holding

the bag, should one partner fail. Clash of organizational cultures. Animosity can develop when organizations are not honest about their differences.

4. Clash of leadership vision and style. A clash between individual leader's egos can spell doom for collaborative efforts.
5. Inadequate information technology infrastructure. The rapid pace of technological development challenges institutions to maintain coherence in programs and services.
6. Operational integration failures. Failure to integrate the many elements contributed by each partner into a cohesive, seamless operation will result in the initiative's failure.
7. Shift in strategic direction. Because of the groundwork needed to make efforts succeed, sudden shifts in direction are likely to result in failure.
8. Staff retention/morale. People directly responsible for managing the partnership must communicate effectively and be committed to the group's goals.

Given the environment's role as an impetus for creating collaborative organizations, it is surprising that very little direct attention has been given in literature to the role that environmental considerations play in the failure of collaborative ventures. As many partnering institutions have discovered, the demand for courses and programs can turn out to be less robust than anticipated, with competition from other providers greater than predicted (Eckel et al., 2003). Commitment, compatibility, leadership, etc. are certainly essential ingredients of successful collaborations. However, without sound

business planning that articulates a purpose, an unmet need, and a viable means for meeting that need, little can be expected in the way of sustainable efforts (Murgatroyd & Woudstra, 1989).

Suggestions for Successful Inter-Institutional Collaboration

Offerman (1997) indicated that literature on building relationships and partnerships in business and other settings offers insights that may translate, in part, to inter-organizational relationships in higher education. Given the nature of distance education as an entrepreneurial enterprise by colleges and universities, inter-organizational collaborations among colleges and universities are likely to share characteristics with both business endeavors and other types of higher education partnerships. Kanter (1994) identified eight characteristics of successful relationships in the private sector that seem reasonable to consider in efforts to understand collaborative distance education efforts:

1. Individual Excellence. Partners are strong and have something of value to contribute, and motives are positive (to pursue new opportunities, not mask weaknesses).
2. Importance. The relationship fits with each partner's long-term goals and strategic direction.
3. Interdependence. The partners need each other to accomplish something they could not otherwise do, and possess complementary skills and assets.
4. Investment. The partners invest in each other by devoting financial and other resources to the relationship.

5. Information. Partners communicate openly and share information required to make the relationship work.
6. Integration. Linkages and shared ways of operating are developed with connections between many people at many organizational levels.
7. Institutionalization. The collaboration is given a formal status, with clear responsibilities and decision processes.
8. Integrity. Relationships are characterized by mutual trust.

Kanter (1994) suggested the success of inter-institutional partnerships depends less on rational considerations and more on family-like relations. According to Kanter, collaborative arrangements tend to be characterized by ambiguity and emotion, making chemistry and trust vital prerequisites to success. As such, organizations are advised to carefully analyze their cultural attributes, as well as their business structures, processes, and goals before entering partnerships with other institutions.

At the same time, the progress of collaborative efforts seems to hinge on additional factors beyond the nurturance of relationships. In contrast to Kanter's (1994) emphasis on relationship aspects, in describing the factors contributing to the success of a distance learning consortium in Michigan, Fleming et al. (2002) emphasized the importance of developing agreement about the formal aspects of the collaboration, including: home and provider college responsibilities, common tuition structures, tuition sharing arrangements, articulation and financial aid agreements, and the guidelines for online programs of study. Similarly, as Baus and Ramsbottom (1999) pointed out, consortia cannot be sustained on "the occasional, serendipitous discovery of shared self-

interest” (p. 8). Rather, successful consortia must include a strategic focus and structures that facilitate timely and appropriate decision-making and economic sustainability.

In a review of literature on coalitions and collaborations considered in a variety of contexts, Legler and Reischl (2003, p. 55-56) identified “a general pattern of essential elements” they believe to be related to successful inter-organizational collaboration. First, coalitions should incorporate diversity of stakeholders in the organization, including all individuals and organizations that have a direct stake in the issues being addressed by the coalition. In addition, for coalitions to function effectively, participants need to understand their interests are interdependent with others--that is, they cannot solve the problem at hand on their own. The formal aspects of collaborative relationships, which include written rules, policies, and goals, appear to be critical in the development of collaborative partnerships. These documents help ensure productive mutual action and reduce the possibility of disagreements, uncoordinated actions, and problems. In addition, the processes of communicating, coordinating, and planning need to be effective to meet goals and minimize discord. In pulling together all these elements, an effective leader or convener is essential in shaping the direction and tone of the partnership.

Mattessich and Monsey (1992) compiled a list of factors impacting the performance of collaborations formed by human service, government, and other non-profit organizations that cut across environmental, relationship, and structural elements. The authors contend the six categories of factors summarized that follow must be addressed to collaborate effectively.

Environment

Environmental characteristics include geographic location and the social context within which a collaborative group exists. While the group may influence elements in the external environment, it does not control them. Factors within the environment include (a) a history of collaboration in the community, (b) a perception within the community the group is a legitimate leader for the goals it intends to pursue, and (c) support from those who control resources and a favorable climate from the public. The concept of community, according to Matteßich and Monsey (1992) includes not only a geographic base, but also “a set of people or organizations with common ties based upon professional discipline, industry, ethnicity, etc.” (p. 16).

Membership Characteristics

The skills, attitudes, and opinions of individuals, as well as the cultures and capacities of the parent organizations constitute membership characteristics that impact the success of collaborative efforts. In particular, the following factors influence the efficacy of inter-institutional efforts: (a) mutual respect, understanding, and trust, (b) appropriate representation from each segment, (c) a belief by members that benefits associated with the collaboration will offset disadvantages, and (d) the ability to compromise.

Process/Structural Factors

This family of factors involves the management, decision-making, and operational systems of collaborative efforts. Factors include (a) a shared stake and ownership in processes and outcomes, (b) multiple layers of decision-making, including the appropriate

staff from each organization, (c) flexibility in organizing and accomplishing work, (d) clear roles and policies, and (e) adaptability in responding to trends, environmental changes, and new directions by members.

Communication

Central to factors related to communication are the channels that are used to send and receive information, ways of keeping others informed, and the ways in which opinions are conveyed that influence the group. Among the communication factors that contribute to success are open and frequent communication and well-established informal and formal communication links.

Purpose

The reasons for the development of a collaborative effort, the results or vision the group takes, and the tasks a group defines must be attainable and clear to all partners. Factors within this category include (a) concrete, attainable goals and objectives, (b) a shared vision with agreed upon mission, objectives, and strategies, and (c) a shared purpose, unique from that of member organizations.

Resources

Financial and human input is necessary for viable collaborative groups. Specific resource factors that contribute to success are an adequate, consistent financial base, as well as a skilled convener who commands respect from the partners and provides balance between process and task activities.

A Systems Approach to Understanding Organizations

Emerging from von Bertalanffy's General Systems Theory (with its roots in biology), systems theory provides a framework for understanding, describing, and explaining patterns of organizational behavior, as well as a conceptual language for discussing organizational elements and their relationships (Birnbaum, 1988; Hanna, 1988; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Morgan, 1997; Senge, 1990). It is important to note the term, "systems," (sometimes referred to as systems theory, open systems theory, systems perspective, systems framework, or systems thinking) reflects many different meanings and applications (Patton, 2002). However, a generally agreed upon principle within the systems literature argues that all living systems, including organizations, share common characteristics, and these characteristics must be considered as they interact together, rather than in isolation (Hanna, 1988). The application of a systems framework in exploring organizational behavior consistently includes the following concepts (e.g., Birnbaum, 1988; Hanna, 1988; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Morgan, 1997):

1. **Boundary.** All organizations have a border or boundary (physical, temporal, social, or psychological) that differentiates them from others. The degree of openness, or permeability, is a key variable that influences the system's survival. Too much permeability can overwhelm the system with demands, while too little can isolate the organization.
2. **Environment.** By definition, everything outside a particular system's boundary is part of its environment. As systems, organizations must interface with elements in the environment in order to survive. In open systems, boundaries

are permeable, and frequent and complex interactions take place between the environment and system elements.

3. Purpose. A basic tenet in systems thinking is that all organizations serve at the pleasure of their environment. Stated another way, the purpose of an organization can be thought of as an implicit agreement or contract with the environment. An organization's survival depends on its ability to fulfill its contract with its environment (Hanna, 1988). The purpose can be illuminated by posing the question: "Why does this organization exist?"
4. Inputs. To meet their purpose, fulfill their mission, and carry out strategies, organizations must import energy and resources from the environment. Inputs to organizational systems include people, ideas, resources, and involvement from other institutions and systems (Birnbaum, 1988).
5. Transformation. Inputs must be transformed through core processes into other forms (to be exported in the form of outputs). The transformation, or "work," taking place within organizations creates new products, processes, materials or knowledge; educates or trains people; and/or provides services.
6. Outputs. Systems export materials or energy (products, skills, services, knowledge, etc.) to the environment.
7. Feedback. This term refers to measures of acceptability of outputs and the purposes and goals of the system. Feedback can be thought of as a signal to the system about how well the system is functioning in relation to its environment.

8. Negative Entropy. Over time, all systems display the tendency to run down and move toward disarray. Negative entropy refers to the ability of organizational systems to import energy to stave off decline (Morgan, 1997).

Another generally accepted tenet of systems thinking is skepticism of a reductionist view of cause and effect relationships between parts within organizations (Birnbaum, 1988; Morgan 1997; Checkland & Scholes, 1999; Patton, 2002; Senge, 1990). Due to the inherent complexities within organizations, an approach of attempting to change one or more variables within a social system and meaningfully calculating the effect is viewed with suspicion. Instead of searching for linear relationships, systems thinking strives for a holistic understanding of the complex relationships among the structures, functions, behaviors, and other features of the system. Senge (1990, pp. 6-7) illustrated the holistic orientation of systems thinking in this way:

A cloud masses, the sky darkens, leaves twist upward, and we know it will rain. We also know that after the storm, the runoff will feed into groundwater miles away, and the sky will grow clear by tomorrow. All these events are distant in time and space, and yet they are all interconnected within the same pattern. Each has an influence that is usually hidden from view. You can only understand the system of a rainstorm by contemplating the whole, not any individual part of the pattern.

Senge (p. 7) extends the premise of systems thinking to organizations:

Business and other human endeavors are also systems. They, too, are bound by invisible fabrics of interrelated actions, which often take years to fully play out their effects on each other. Since we are part of that lacework ourselves, it's doubly hard to see the whole pattern of change. Instead, we tend to focus on snapshots of isolated parts of the system, and wonder why our deepest problems never seem to get solved. Systems thinking is a conceptual framework, a body of knowledge and tools that have been developed over the last fifty years to make the full patterns clearer, and to help us see how to change them effectively.

Although the literature review uncovered no in-depth analyses in which a systems framework was used to analyze a collaborative organization, systems terminology and concepts have been used to describe collaborative efforts. Kanter (1994) referred to collaborations as “living systems that evolve progressively in their possibilities” (p. 97). While Bergquist, et al. (1995) focused primarily on collaborative arrangements in a business context, given the growing similarities between business and education (Twitchell, 2004), the following quote by Bergquist et al., (1995) seems appropriate to colleges and universities, as well:

In today’s world it is often difficult to know where one company’s boundaries begin and another’s end, and who learns what from whom We see partnerships as living systems, and we have looked for themes and patterns that make up their multidimensional relationships. We believe this web of relationships is the essence of an organization’s sustained health and its ability to remain competitive in today’s changing global environment” (p. xv).

To summarize, the central concern of systems thinking is to examine relationships, structure, and interdependent and interrelated parts with the aim of increasing understanding of the complexities inherent in organizations (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Senge, 1990). The power of systems thinking, according to Checkland & Scholes (1999, pp. A3-4), stems from the cycles of learning in which “enriched ideas” inform practice and help in efforts to tackle the complexities and “messy problems” confronting all organizations. In particular, systems thinking has contributed to the field of organizational development by emphasizing the importance of congruencies among the parts--purposes, goals, structures, and processes--while identifying and addressing potential sources of dysfunction (Hanna, 1988; Morgan, 1997).

Summary

The strategy of collaborating with other colleges and universities represents a rational response to a turbulent and increasingly competitive environment. Successful inter-institutional collaboration helps to insulate institutions from threats and open doors to new opportunities. While collaboration offers the potential to create competitive advantages for participants, experience and research have shown that numerous barriers and obstacles exist. A number of general strategies for creating and operating inter-institutional efforts have been recommended that may have utility in sorting through issues related to inter-institutional collaboration. However, the argument has been set forth that advice in the form of broad organizational strategies tends not to be insightful, and, in fact, can obscure information that is useful; rather, it is often the micro details that prove more helpful to leaders (Kezar & Eckel, 1999). In the review of literature, however, no research was uncovered that explored, in-depth and in micro-detail, the factors that contribute to the viability of distance learning consortia. As mentioned in Chapter 1, the lack of research in the field of inter-institutional collaboration is a contributing factor in the problems associated with creating and sustaining collaborative ventures.

The agenda for gaining a deeper understanding of inter-organizational collaboration is daunting, but given the proliferation of collaborative activities that are emerging in response to organizational and societal problems, the “press for knowledge should be keen and the opportunities for learning abundant” (Wood & Gray, 1991, p. 162). Mattessich and Monsey (1992, p. 38) summarized the need for additional research with their conclusion that there is “much to learn” about the complex and

powerful, yet often “very fragile” processes of collaboration. Given the complexities involved in collaborating across institutions, a systems perspective seems to offer a potentially useful framework from which to learn more about the dynamics of inter-institutional collaboration. In the next chapter, I describe the methodology used to conduct an in-depth case study of a distance education consortium that has experienced rapid growth in enrollments and has achieved a degree of financial self-sufficiency.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to gain a deep understanding of key factors that contribute to the viability of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium. The nature of the research problem, purpose, questions and organizing framework pointed to qualitative case study as the most appropriate form of inquiry for this study. The intent of this inquiry was to add to the knowledge base of “what makes collaboration work” through an intensive study of one inter-institutional distance education organization.

This chapter begins by briefly outlining some core differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches to inquiry with respect to knowledge claims. This overview helps to locate some key assumptions I hold with regard to the research problem and the nature of what constitutes knowledge. Next, I describe features of qualitative research and the basic elements of case study research as a method and approach to the collection of data. In addition, I touch upon the importance of recognizing how my experiences, assumptions, and beliefs influenced this inquiry. I then provide details about the design of this study, including the sample selection, data and data sources, data collection, analysis, credibility, and strengths/limitations.

Knowledge Claims

Ultimately, researchers position themselves within the research enterprise by identifying the underlying ideas and assumptions that drive their work, as well as the procedures they intend to follow (Wolcott, 1992). Quantitative and qualitative researchers fall into two different philosophical camps with respect to views and assumptions about

the nature of knowledge. These divergent views and assumptions lead to very different goals, strategies of inquiry, and procedures. The differences between the philosophical orientations of quantitative and qualitative research, commonly referred to as postpositive and constructivist respectively, as described by Creswell (2003), follow.

Postpositive Knowledge Claims

Sometimes referred to as the scientific method, quantitative research, positivist/postpositivist research, empirical science, and postpositivism, this orientation assumes that knowledge is produced through careful observation and measurement of an objective reality that exists in the world. From this perspective, the intent of research is to reduce causes and effects into small, discrete ideas that can be tested and validated. As such, developing numeric measures of observations and studying the behavior of individuals is paramount. Researcher objectivity is viewed as an essential component of sound inquiry, and scientific standards of validity and reliability are critical. Beginning with a theoretical proposition, this approach generates questions or statements about the relationship among variables and then refines or abandons them based on the evidence.

Socially Constructed Knowledge Claims

A central assumption in social constructivism (often combined with interpretivism) is that individuals seek to understand the world in which they live and work, and as such, they develop subjective meanings of their experiences. Because the meanings are inherently varied and multiple, researchers look for the complexities of perspectives. The goal of this type of research is to rely as much as possible on the participant's views of the situation being studied. Meanings are formed through

interactions with others and through historical and cultural norms in the individuals' lives. As such, constructivist researchers often examine the processes of interaction among individuals, as well as the contexts in which people live and work. In addition, they recognize and acknowledge that their personal, cultural, and historical experiences influence their interpretation. According to Creswell (1994), a constructivist researcher's intent is "to make sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world" (p. 9).

In general, quantitative research assumes a positivist or postpositivist perspective regarding knowledge, while qualitative research emphasizes socially constructed knowledge claims. The disparate assumptions embedded within the two orientations result in different research goals. Stake (1995, p. 38) summarizes the differences in the aims of the two approaches as seeking "cause and effect relationships" (quantitative) versus "understanding of human experience" (qualitative). Stated another way, quantitative researchers strive for explanation and control; qualitative researchers press for understanding the complex interrelationships among all that exists.

Qualitative Inquiry

In addition to the difference in what can appropriately be claimed as knowledge, qualitative research includes a number of other characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of inquiry. Building on the work of Rossman and Rallis (1998), Creswell (2003, pp. 181-182) suggested that qualitative research takes place in a natural setting, uses multiple methods that are interactive and humanistic, and is an emergent, rather than a tightly prefigured process. In addition, qualitative researchers take a holistic view of the phenomenon and make an interpretation of the data, while systematically reflecting about

how his or her personal biography shapes the study. Qualitative research employs a reasoning process that is multifaceted, iterative, and simultaneous--a cycling back and forth from data collection and analysis to the problem. In qualitative inquiry, an inductive research strategy is usually employed that builds abstractions, concepts, hypotheses, or theories, rather than testing existing theories, with the findings reported in the form of themes, categories, typologies, concepts, tentative hypotheses, and even theory, which have been inducted from the data (Merriam, 1998).

Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 6) identified the naturalistic approach of qualitative research and the aim of a “holistic” (i.e., systemic, encompassing, integrated) overview of the context under study (logic, arrangements, and explicit and implicit rules) as key features of qualitative inquiry. In addition, they described the importance of capturing data about the perceptions of the local actors “from the inside” through a deep attentiveness and empathetic understanding as a central component of qualitative research. A primary task, then, is to explicate the ways people in the study come to understand and manage their day-to-day situations. Inherent in qualitative research is the acknowledgement that multiple interpretations of data are possible, but some are more compelling than others.

The description of qualitative research offered by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) places the researcher squarely in the midst of the natural world, with a focus on using qualitative practices to make sense of the phenomenon of interest:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices transform the world. They turn the world into a series of

representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretative, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (p. 3)

While researchers enter the world of participants, a central tenet of qualitative inquiry is the importance of understanding the phenomenon of interest from the participant's perspectives, not the researcher's (Merriam, 1998). Referred to as a phenomenological perspective, most qualitative research attempts to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in natural settings. Inherent in this approach is the need to acknowledge the subjective nature of qualitative research in that results are not viewed as transcendent truths, rather "as a particular rendering or interpretation of reality grounded in the empirical world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 24).

An assumption that rests at the core of the phenomenological approach is the importance of seeking out and better understanding what people experience and how they make sense of their experience. As a result, the "subject matter" of research efforts involves capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon--"how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, and talk about it with others" (Patton, 2002, p. 104, 107). According to Patton, the methodological approach that follows is gathering data as directly as possible through participant observations and in-depth interviews with people who have first-hand experience with the phenomenon of interest.

Thoughts as I Begin This Study

A critical characteristic of qualitative inquiry is that the researcher is the primary instrument for collecting and analyzing data (Merriam, 1998). As such, it is important to acknowledge, to the extent possible and in a forthright way, the role my experiences, biases, values, and personal interests have played in shaping my perceptions of higher education and the research project (Creswell, 2003).

I share the underlying philosophical assumption of qualitative research--that reality is constructed by individuals as they interact with their social worlds. And I believe that efforts to understand “the meaning people have constructed” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6) and how they make sense of their experiences are critical in enhancing our knowledge takes place in organizations.

Despite the difficulties associated with inter-institutional collaboration, I began the study with a view that distance education was a potentially promising arena for colleges to work together in creating opportunities for both students and institutions. At the same time, my personal experience (confirmed by the review of literature) provided a grim reality check that, while the potential exists for consortia to “achieve more, do something better, or reduce costs” (Neal, 1988, p. 3), the likelihood of failure is high.

As such, in selecting the ICCOC as a case, I recognized the need to be vigilant that my interest in studying what makes inter-institutional collaboration work did not result in investigative myopia. The potential danger of researchers accentuating only the positive aspects of inter-institutional efforts was suggested in the conclusion by Lawrence, Phillips, and Hardy (1999): “The positive connotations of collaboration . . . seem to have

lead to an underexamination of negative outcomes in the empirical and theoretical literatures” (p. 483). To combat the tendency, I made a concentrated effort to follow the advice of McCracken (as cited in Creswell, 2003, p. 89) to help ensure participants were free to describe their experiences without being unduly influenced by language used during data collection that might suggest pre-determined outcomes. So, while evidence suggested the ICCOC represented a case of a viable distance education consortium, and there were outward indicators of success (e.g., enrollment growth), I believed it was critical to avoid making a leap that the organization was an unqualified success. As such I made a conscious effort to learn about the full range of perspectives, both positive and negative, of those who work within the organization. In particular, I actively sought evidence of problems that have existed within the organization.

My work experience spans a variety of organizations and contexts, including two large companies in the private sector, a medium sized Iowa community college (not one of the seven member colleges in this study), and my current employer, a comprehensive public regional university. For the past twelve years, in the midst of the explosion of distance education, I have been deeply involved in the development, organization, and administration of distance education outreach efforts, including several initiatives to collaborate inter-institutionally. I believe my experiences informed this inquiry in a positive way. At the same time, I openly acknowledge that my experiences are accompanied by a set of assumptions and biases that have influenced the way I have viewed the entire research process. Throughout the research, I made a concentrated effort

to continually reflect upon how my experiences, values, beliefs, biases, and assumptions shaped and interacted with my thinking and my efforts to understand this case.

The Case Study Approach

Within the field of qualitative study, case study has been identified as a distinct method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003b). Merriam (1998) described qualitative case study as “an intensive, holistic description and analysis of a bounded phenomenon such as a program, an institution, a person, a process, or a social unit” (p. xiii). In the section that follows, I briefly elaborate on the components of Merriam’s description, beginning with the notion of boundedness.

Conceptualizing the object of the case study as a bounded phenomenon is the factor that distinguishes it from other types of qualitative research (Stake, 2000). Case study researchers have referred to the concept of boundedness both in terms of context and function. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 25) defined a case as “a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context” that can be thought of as a unit of analysis that answers the questions of “what my case is” and “where my case leaves off.” In the view of Stake (2000, p. 436), the notion of a case as a bounded phenomenon or system means it is “almost certainly a functioning specific” with purpose and working parts. A variety of bounded social units have been the focus of case study research, including individuals, groups, organizations, and even nations (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The notion of bounded system aside, qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the elements of searching for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the

primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive approach, and a highly descriptive product (Merriam, 2002).

Even though the focus of a case study may be on a particular social unit, understanding contextual conditions is a critical aspect in understanding the phenomenon. According to Yin (2003b, p. 13), the phenomenon on which the case study inquiry is based must be investigated “within its real life context,” especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident. However, Stake (2003), suggested that because cases are characterized by patterns in behavior, as well as coherence and sequence, it is common to recognize that certain features are within the system, and other features are outside.

The specific phenomenon under investigation in this study was the Iowa Community College Online Consortium, an inter-institutional partnership founded and operated by seven Iowa community colleges. As a bounded system, or functioning unit, the consortium seemed to offer an excellent opportunity for learning about the factors that contribute to its viability as an inter-institutional collaboration. Cases can also be bounded with respect to “space” and the number of participants involved (Merriam, 2002). For example, this investigation did not include a line of inquiry intended to understand the consortium’s impact on the home colleges--even though this avenue might have produced insightful issues and findings. Rather, the case study focused on developing a holistic understanding of the consortium as a social unit and with providing an analysis and interpretation of the data in the form of categories, themes, and patterns that help explain its viability.

Like all forms of qualitative research, case study can be characterized as an intensive research strategy. Qualitative research is conducted through intense contact with a field or life situation which reflects everyday life of individuals, groups, societies, and organizations (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Case study researchers may be interested in a general phenomenon beyond the particular case; however, the primary focus is on understanding, through concentrated inquiry, the unique case at hand (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000; Stake, 2000).

In contrast to survey research that typically gathers only a small amount of data from each case, qualitative case research involves the collection of large amounts of information, across a range of dimensions, on one or a small number of cases (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000). While much of the contemporary research regarding inter-organizational relationships has been dominated by large-scale quantitative approaches, Hardy et al. (2003) suggested that much can be gained from fine-grained qualitative approaches to the study inter-organizational relationships that examine more localized relationships that can be explored in a more intensive fashion. Consistent with a phenomenological perspective, this study explored how a set of participants directly involved with the consortium's work perceived their experiences.

Another key characteristic of qualitative case study research (and qualitative research, in general) involves consideration of the problem, issues, or case from a holistic perspective with the intent of gaining an integrated picture of the situation--an understanding of how the parts work together to form the whole (Merriam, 1998). Hardy et al., (2003, p. 343) suggested "a more holistic approach" is necessary in deepening our

understanding of the complexities and relationships inherent in inter-institutional collaborations. Similarly, given the dynamic nature of collaborative organizations as living systems (Kanter, 1994), attempts to increase understanding are predicated on the examination of the organization from a holistic perspective that acknowledges the interplay between factors and the whole (Black, 2003). Clearly, a qualitative case study approach is consistent with a concentrated effort to deepen, holistically, the understanding of factors that have contributed to the viability of the Consortium.

Research Design

In case study research, the investigator tries to understand behaviors, issues, and contexts with regard to a particular case through a search for patterns, for consistency, with certain conditions (Stake, 1995). The research design--the logic that links the data to be collected with the initial questions in the study (Yin, 2003b)--forms the foundation to gain an understanding of the behaviors, issues, contexts, and patterns within the case. Stated another way by Philliber, Schwab, and Samsloss (as cited in Yin, 2003b, p. 21), the research design can be conceived as a "blueprint" for the research that deals with at least four problems: what questions to study, what data are relevant, what data to collect, and how to analyze the results.

The overarching research question posed in this inquiry was: "What factors, individually and in combination, contribute to the viability of one distance education consortium?" A number of supporting questions (detailed in Chapter 1) were derived to help bring focus to the primary question and the relevant data and collection procedures. The following section describes my rationale for selecting ICCOC for a case study, the

data sources and procedures used to collect data, and the processes involved in analyzing the data.

Case Selection

The ICCOC was selected as the unit of analysis for this case study based on purposeful sampling. According to Merriam (1998), the choice of purposeful sampling stems from the assumption the investigator “wants to discover, understand, and gain insight and therefore must select a sample from which the most can be learned” (p. 61). Similarly, Stake (2000) advised researchers to choose cases they feel they can learn the most from, with consideration given to how accessible the case is and the amount of time that can be devoted to understanding it.

The potential to learn more about the nature of factors contributing to the viability of a collaborative inter-institutional organization was the primary factor in the selection of the ICCOC as the setting for this study. The ICCOC aligned well with the research problem, and it was believed the organization presented an opportunity to generate new insights as an “information-rich case” (Patton, 2002, p. 46). In addition, time and accessibility were important considerations in the selection of the consortium as the unit of analysis. All the partner colleges were located within a reasonable driving distance of the researcher, and the consortium director, past director, and others associated with the organization indicated a willingness to cooperate in the study.

This study adopted another common qualitative sampling strategy: the selection of a case that is “successful at something and therefore a good source of lessons learned” (Patton, 2002, p. 7). As outlined in Chapter 1, the ICCOC appeared to be a viable

consortium in that agreement among the partner institutions had been reached, the agreement had been implemented, and the organization had survived for several years. In addition, outward indicators suggested the ICCOC represented a case of inter-institutional collaboration that moved beyond issues of agreement, implementation, and survival into the realm of strength and sustainability.

According to Bates (2000), the strength of a distance learning consortium can be assessed by responses to the following questions:

1. Can a potential student take a whole program through the consortium without having to physically move between institutions?
2. Can a student automatically or without too much trouble transfer credits and courses from one institution to another within the consortium?
3. Does the consortium provide “one-stop shopping,” namely, student services (advice, counseling, and tutoring), registration for any institution in the consortium, and fee payment, at any single point?
4. Do the students have a much wider range of choices of courses, and a better quality, resulting from the consortium’s activities?
5. Is there consistency in fees between courses and programs offered by various consortium partners?

Evidence from ICCOC documents, informal conversations with several consortium participants, and observations indicated the ICCOC could answer “yes” to all five of these questions, suggesting it might be considered a case of a strong distance learning consortium as characterized by Bates (2000). In further evidence of the ICCOC’s

strength, the organization was awarded the 2001 Point of Presence Award by the Iowa Distance Learning Association (IDLA). This awarded recognizes excellence in program design and development, “based on demonstrated impact on learners and learning communities” (Iowa Distance Learning Association, n.d.). In 2004, the Iowa Distance Education Association awarded the ICCOC the “Outstanding Innovator” award in recognition of contributions to distance learning “through outstanding teaching, program design and development, innovations in methods, technique, and technology, and advocacy” (Iowa Distance Learning Association, n.d.).

In addition, the evidence reviewed in the preparation of the research proposal suggested the consortium had achieved a degree of sustainability, another attribute of a strong collaborative organization (Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999). It had been in operation for more than four years, demonstrated a track record of increasing enrollments, and appeared to have reached a state of financial self-sufficiency. At the time the research proposal was prepared, the seven participating colleges had recently agreed to formally extend the agreement through July of 2007, providing further evidence of the organization’s sustainability.

Data Sources and Collection

A fundamental tenet of case study research (as well as other types of qualitative inquiry) is that using multiple sources of evidence strengthens case studies (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003a). Data collections that help produce qualitative findings stem from three primary sources: direct observation; in-depth, open-ended interviews; and written documents (Patton, 2002). Or, in the verb form set forth by Wolcott (1992), the

collection of data in qualitative research can be subsumed by “everyday terms such as *watching, asking, and . . . reviewing*” (p. 21). Qualitative research incorporates a distinctive feature that differentiates it from other approaches; that is, the qualitative researcher is the primary instrument for collecting data, as well as analyzing it (Merriam, 1998).

In the case study of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium, I collected data through direct observations, in-depth, semi-structured interviews, and document reviews. Within these three avenues, many decisions about what specific sources of data to pursue were made. Following the advice of Stake (1995), the primary criterion used to identify specific sources of data from which to conduct the research was the opportunity to learn something and the ability to gain access and permissions.

Observations. Because of the “virtual” nature of the organization, there was no physical location in which participants in the study convened daily to conduct business. However, an observation was conducted on a face-to-face meeting of a group known as the Oversight Committee in March 2005. The Oversight Committee has charted the direction of the ICCOC, established policies, and designed the structures and processes that frame the work of the organization. The Oversight Committee, comprised of academic officers, distance education administrators, and the ICCOC’s core staff was identified by participants as a crucial factor in the ICCOC’s performance. Fourteen of the eighteen members of the Oversight Committee were present, with at least one representative attending from each college. In addition, a representative from eCollege, and two ICCOC support staff were present. The meeting lasted for approximately ninety

minutes. The meeting was audiotaped by the organization, and a copy of the audiotape was made available to the researcher. The observation provided a first-hand look at how the group interacts and conducts business in a face-to-face setting. Topics discussed during the meeting included updates on a new real-time registration system for the member colleges, a Title III grant involving faculty training and student service enhancements, new degree programs, a standardized course template, and ICCOC financial data.

In exploring the ICCOC as a possible case study and to assist in preparing the research proposal, I attended the organization's annual conferences in 2003 and 2004. Following approval of the research project, I observed the fifth annual Iowa Community College Online Consortium Spring Conference held in March 2005, a two-day event hosted by two of the member colleges. The purpose of the annual conference has been to provide participants with "new ideas for improving and advancing online education." Educational tracks were designed for instructors, administrators, and staff members involved with student services and learning resources. I observed a variety of formal presentations, including sessions provided by online instructors, the director of the ICCOC, and two Oversight Committee members. Informal interactions among the people involved with the ICCOC were observed, as well. In addition, I attended the keynote sessions, as well as the banquet dinner.

Following the recommendation of Bogdan and Biklen (2003), detailed fieldnotes were taken in conjunction with both the Oversight meeting and the conferences. In the

fieldnotes, I described what was observed and experienced. In addition, I recorded comments, notes, and questions regarding my thoughts about emerging ideas and themes.

Interviews. Consistent with a phenomenological approach to qualitative inquiry, this study assumed that knowledge of the factors that contribute to the consortium's success is embedded in the perceptions of those involved in the work of the organization. Interviews (and the observations) provided direct quotes from participants about their relationships, experiences, feelings, beliefs, and assumptions related to the consortium. In other words, the interviews and observations provided rich data about how the people involved have perceived their experiences within the ICCOC, as well as the meanings they associate with their involvement.

Stake (1995) wrote about the close fit between case study research and the strategy of collecting data through interviews in efforts to gain a deep understanding of cases:

Much of what we cannot observe for ourselves has been or is being observed by others. Two principal uses of case study are to obtain the descriptions and interpretations of others. The case will not be seen the same by everyone. Qualitative researchers take pride in discovering and portraying the multiple views of the case. The interview is the main road to multiple realities. (p. 64)

The purpose of qualitative interviewing is to gather data about how the participants "view their world, to learn their terminology and judgments, and to capture the complexities of their individual perceptions and experiences" (Patton, 2002, p. 348).

This study adopted in-depth, semi-structured interviews as an approach to provide those involved with the consortium an opportunity to express, in their own words, perspectives about their experiences. Semi-structured interviews are characterized by

flexibly worded questions, or a mix of more or less structured questions. Rather than following a standardized list of questions with each interviewee, the tone of semi-structured interviews is typically more conversational. Specific information may be solicited by including a highly structured portion of the interview, but most of the interview is guided by a list of topics or issues to be explored rather than pre-determining the exact order or wording of the questions. A key strength of this approach is its flexibility in allowing the researcher “to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (Merriam, 1998, p. 74).

Using a semi-structured interview approach (protocol included in Appendix C), I interviewed each of the eighteen members of the Oversight Committee (Appendix B) to learn about their experiences and perceptions regarding factors they believe are important in explaining the consortium’s viability. As members of the group given the charge of “addressing all issues related to the effective and efficient operation of the consortium,” this set of individuals, comprised of academic officers, distance education administrators, and members of the Consortium core staff, was viewed as likely to have a deep understanding of the factors involved in making the collaboration work.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face at the participant’s home institution, with the exception of one telephone interview that was conducted as a result of a scheduling conflict. The interviews, lasting approximately forty-five minutes each, were conducted over a two month period during December 2004 and January 2005. Participants in the study signed a participant consent form. To protect the identity of participants during the

data collection and analysis, subjects were assigned a unique code number. Data was kept in a secure location under the direct control of the researcher.

With the exception of one interview, all were recorded and later transcribed by the researcher. The interview that was not recorded took place in a cafeteria (at the request of the participant). The level of noise and public setting made recording the interview infeasible. In lieu of the a recording, detailed notes were taken to capture the participant's responses.

Immediately following each interview, fieldnotes were prepared that included a written summary of the interview and questions, notes about emerging issues, and analytical comments. These fieldnotes helped track the development of the study and served as a repository for reflections about the interviews and thoughts about the case as a whole, while providing a forum to begin the process of data analysis.

Document review. Documents that were collected and reviewed during this inquiry included primarily "official documents" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 58) in the form of internal reports, minutes of meetings, guidelines, policies, newsletters, advertising materials, and the consortium's website. In particular, the annual status report prepared by the ICCOC staff provided rich data about the outcomes, structures, and processes of the organization as changes occurred over time.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The purpose and goals of data analysis in qualitative case studies have been expressed in various ways. In the view of Stake (1995), the goal of data analysis and interpretation in case study research is to make sense of the data and give meaning to the

researcher's impressions. To Merriam (1998), a primary goal of data analysis in case studies is to communicate understanding. For Patton (2002, p. 447), the purpose of qualitative analysis in case study research is to "gather comprehensive, systematic, and in-depth information" about the case at hand, with the case study report as the "product" of the process.

In my efforts to make sense of the data and communicate the findings in a meaningful way, the data analysis took place concurrently with the process of data collection. This approach was consistent with a prevalent theme in the literature that suggests the process of qualitative data analysis should be ongoing, taking place simultaneously with data collection (e.g., Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Similarly, Stake (1995) suggests that in qualitative analysis there is not a particular moment when data analysis begins, since analysis is comprised both of giving meaning to first impressions as well as to final compilations.

As mentioned previously, initial reactions to each of the interviews and ideas about emerging issues and themes were recorded using fieldnotes. Efforts to analyze the data from the beginning provided an opportunity to seek clarifications from subsequent participants, modify interview questions, and delve deeper into specific areas. For example, the theme of the Oversight Committee "flying under the radar" (of the respective presidents) emerged in the first few interviews as a factor in explaining the viability of the ICCOC. In recognizing this theme early on, I was better prepared to ask questions designed to draw out deeper perspectives from the participants about what this

concept meant to those involved and how it was related to the performance of the organization.

An additional strategy to help move the analysis forward during data collection was to record my comments, questions, and ideas about categories and themes during the process of transcribing the interviews. An advantage afforded by this approach was in listening to the words of the participants a second time, and thinking about the context in which they were spoken, while they were fresh in my mind.

While efforts to analyze and make comparisons within the data and the relevant literature were undertaken while data was still being collected, when the data reached the point of data saturation --the point at which the information and data became “redundant” (Bogdan & Biken, 2003, p. 62)--I began a more systematic process of refining the categories and themes that emerged during data collection. Analysis of the data gathered in a case study--including making sense of the data and writing a case study that effectively communicates understanding of the case--requires the researcher to systematically search and arrange the interview transcripts, fieldnotes, and other materials (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Patton, 2002). In addition to preparing and organizing the data, data analysis involves moving deeper into an understanding of the data, presenting the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning (Creswell, 2003).

Janesick (2003, p. 60) suggested three rules of thumb that are intended to help qualitative researchers in working back and forth between the data and reactions to the data:

1. Look for meaning, the perspectives of the participants in the study.
2. Look for relationships regarding the structure, occurrence, and distribution of events over time.
3. Look for points of tension: What does not fit? What are the conflicting points of evidence in the case?

In the context of these suggestions and with the research questions in mind, I used two related approaches in deriving, organizing, and describing the categories, themes, and patterns that help to illuminate the case: content analysis and constant comparisons.

Patton (2002, p. 453) referred to the process of content analysis as “any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings.” Merriam (1998) described content analysis as “a systematic procedure for describing the content of communications” (p. 123).

The process I used to analyze the content of the data followed Bogdan and Biklen’s (2003) suggestion that content analysis begin by searching data for regularities, patterns, and topics and then writing down words and categories, or “coding categories,” that represent them. In developing the coding categories, I began by analyzing the data for key words and phrases, looking for recurring concepts. For example, the terms “respect” and “trust” were repeatedly mentioned by participants as important factors in explaining the consortium’s viability. In working with the data, it quickly became apparent that respect and trust were critical factors that helped explain how a committee of seventeen people, from seven different colleges, was able to work effectively as a group. In analyzing the data, recurrent words and phrases pointed to other themes, for example,

“basic diplomacy” and “consensus decision making,” related to what became a category of factors, “group processes,” that helped explain the viability of the consortium.

The process of data analysis and the refinement of categories and themes was far from linear. Following the advice of Bogdan and Biklen (2003) and Merriam (1998), the tentative categories, themes, and patterns were constantly compared with each other, as well as the related literature. As Flick (2002) summarized, in using the constant comparative method, material that is coded is “not finished with after its classification, but is continually integrated into the further process of comparison” (p. 231). Similarly, Stake (1995, pp. 72-73) pointed out, there is much art and intuitive processing involved in analysis and the search for meaning, and that only “by reading and re-reading accounts, by deep thinking . . . understanding creeps forward and your page is printed.”

In reading and re-reading the data and making comparisons within the data and the literature, the categories and themes were revised numerous times. For example, the first draft of the findings originally contained eight broad categories of factors. This draft was shared with members of my committee who encouraged me to review the data and revisit the presentation of the findings. The reflective questions that guided this phase were: (a) Does the data support this finding? (b) Do the categories make sense? (c) How do the categories relate to each other? I made a concentrated effort to reexamine all the data in light of these reflective questions, the research questions, and in the context of the ongoing literature review. As a result of this iterative process, several of the original categories were combined. In addition, upon further analysis and reflection, one of the categories that had been included in the first draft of the findings, “organizational

culture,” was deemed to be more interpretative, and more appropriately discussed in Chapter 5.

The relationship between the processes of analysis and interpretation bears mention. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) suggested that an explanation regarding the difference between analysis (findings) and interpretation (ideas about findings) is straightforward in words, but in practice the two are difficult to separate. Data analysis involves working with data--organizing, separating, synthesizing--and searching for patterns. The emphasis with interpretation is on explaining and framing ideas in relation to theory, other research, and action, as well as elaborating, in an understandable way, about why the findings are important. Chapter 5 extends the discussion beyond the level of description and analysis of the case into the realm of interpretation by posing the questions, “What does this case mean?” and “What does the data tell me about the nature of the phenomenon of interest?” (Patton, 2002).

To summarize, data in this case was gathered through interviews, observations, and document review. Data from fieldnotes, observer comments, interview transcripts, documents related to the consortium, and related literature, were analyzed using content analysis and constant comparisons. In Chapter 4, I present the results of this process in the form of a case report that includes the findings that flowed from the analysis. A concentrated effort was made to provide an account of the ICCOC that is “richly descriptive in order to afford the reader the vicarious experience of having been there” (Merriam, 1998). In addition, an effort was made to move beyond an aggregation of

sections in shaping a narrative that makes the case comprehensible to the reader, without compromising the complexities of the case (Stake, 1995).

Credibility of the Study

Within the research community, the question of how the validity and reliability of qualitative studies should be judged has been the topic of a spirited and, at times, contentious debate. While all research is concerned with producing valid and reliable knowledge, there is little consensus in the field as to the appropriate criteria for assessing validity and reliability, or if it is even possible (Merriam, 1998). In addition, there is little agreement on the appropriate terminology (e.g., credibility, authenticity, goodness, trustworthiness, and plausibility) to suggest the construct of validity. However, most qualitative researchers agree that the constructs of validity and reliability that have historically been applied to quantitative research don't fit with a qualitative paradigm that asserts there is not a single reality that awaits discovery. There is general consensus, however, that qualitative researchers need to demonstrate their studies are credible (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

This study adopted triangulation, member checks, and researcher reflexivity as strategies in establishing and maintaining the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. A description of these strategies follows.

Stated concisely: "Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods" (Patton, 2002, p. 247). The power of triangulation stems from the use of multiple approaches to illuminate, confirm, or dismiss descriptions and interpretations of events, behaviors, and relationships (Stake, 1995). Similarly, according to Creswell and Miller

(2000), triangulation can also be considered a procedure in which researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in the study (Creswell & Miller, 2000). To Flick (1998), triangulation is best understood as a strategy that adds rigor, breadth, complexity, richness, and depth to qualitative research efforts. Patton (2002, p. 555) suggested that multiple methods of data collection and sources reveal different aspects of empirical reality, providing “more grist for the research mill.” In summary, the technique of triangulation is a mode of improving the probability that findings and interpretations will be found credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As indicated in the description of the research design, this study collected data in multiple ways from multiple sources through observations, interviews, and document review.

The process of member checks involves taking data and the researcher’s tentative interpretations back to the participants from whom they were derived and asking whether the results are plausible (Merriam, 1998). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 314), the strategy of member checks represents “the most crucial technique for establishing credibility.” This study followed the advice of Creswell and Miller (2000) in asking participants if the themes and categories that emerge made sense, whether sufficient evidence existed to support them, and whether the overall account was realistic and accurate. In addition, actors studied as part of a case study regularly contribute critical observations, interpretations, and suggestions regarding sources of data. Soliciting feedback from participants regarding the accuracy and palatability of the observations and interpretations in the rough draft stage helps in triangulating the findings (Stake, 1995). A

draft of the Chapter 4, along with a summary of the chapter, was provided to the seventeen members of the Oversight Committee who were interviewed. Participants were invited to provide comments about the categories and themes described in Chapter 4, and they were asked whether they believe the overall account was accurate. Seven participants responded. Two people suggested clarifying a small number of factual details, and their suggestions were incorporated into the final version. Overall, all seven reported the findings accurately depicted the story of the consortium.

The process by which researchers report on personal beliefs, values, assumptions, and biases that may shape their inquiry is referred to as researcher reflexivity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). According to Merriam (1998), taking the step of clarifying the researcher's biases, assumptions, worldview, and theoretical orientation at the outset of the study contributes to the credibility of the study. This strategy requires self-awareness, self-understanding, and self-questioning. Patton (2002, p. 64) suggests that reflexivity is "an ongoing examination of *what I know* and *how I know it*" and is a critical process in developing one's voice and perspective.

Earlier in this chapter, I included a section entitled, "Thoughts as I Begin this Study," in which I outlined some assumptions, values, and biases, as well as disclosing information about my position and work experience might influence this inquiry. Throughout the process of data collection and analysis, I made a concentrated effort to systematically reflect on my role in the inquiry in light of my experiences, biases, interests, and values. Creswell (2003, p. 182) referenced the importance of reflexivity

with his conclusion, that, given the intensive, interpretative nature of qualitative inquiry, the “personal-self becomes inseparable from the researcher-self.”

Strengths/Limitations

Case studies bring a number of strengths to particular research problems. Merriam (1998) captured the primary strengths of the case study approach with the conclusion that:

The case study offers a means of investigating complex social units consisting of variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon. Anchored in real life situations, the case study results in a rich and holistic account of a phenomenon. It offers insights and illuminates meanings that expand its readers' experiences. These insights can be construed as tentative hypotheses that help structure future research; hence, case study plays an important role in advancing a field knowledge base. (p. 41)

With respect to limitations, qualitative studies (in general) and single case studies, in particular, have been criticized with respect to the generalizability of findings to other settings. While single case studies do not provide as strong a base for generalizing to a population of cases as other research designs, a number of qualitative researchers maintain that much can be learned from a particular case (Merriam, 1998). How can a single case contribute to meaningful learning and understanding, given the fact that no two contexts are identical? Stake (1995, 2000) argued that readers can learn vicariously from the researcher's narrative. According to Stake (1995, pp. 85-86), people learn both by receiving generalizations from others, including authors, teachers, and authorities, as well as by forming “naturalistic generalizations” that are embedded in their experiences. Through the processes of naturalistic generalizations, readers may “come to know some things, as if he or she had experienced it” (Stake, 2000, p. 442).

Lincoln and Guba (2000, pp. 39-40) suggested that differences in local conditions lead to only one “true” generalization: “There can be no generalization.” However, by adopting the concept of a “working hypothesis,” which acknowledges the tentative nature research propositions in both the immediate research context and other situations, readers can assess the degree of transferability through what Lincoln and Guba refer to as “fittingness”--the degree of congruence between sending and receiving contexts.

In thinking about applying findings of case studies to other contexts, both the notion of naturalistic generalizations and the concept of working hypotheses require researchers to provide a base of information about the case in the form of a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). Because a researcher cannot know in what situations readers are likely to apply the study findings, it is important to describe a broad range of background features, aspects of the case processes studied, and outcomes so readers have enough information to assess the match between the case studied and their own situation (Firestone, 1993).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to identify, describe, and offer an interpretation of the key factors that have contributed to the viability of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCOC). As described in Chapter 3, data for the case study were gathered through the review of documents, direct observations, and interviews with members of the Oversight Committee (the steering group comprised of academic officers, distance education administrators, and the ICCOC's core staff). The data were analyzed and coded using the constant comparative method, and tentative categories, themes, and patterns were constructed. These categories, themes, and patterns were identified and compared with each other, as well as the related literature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003).

In this chapter, I report the findings of the case study of the ICCOC in two major sections. I begin with a brief description of the organization's origins and an overview of its operation. Next, I describe and analyze a number of key factors in the context, purpose, inputs, structures, processes, leadership, and outcomes of the ICCOC that have influenced the performance of the consortium and its ability to remain viable. It should be noted that quotations included in this chapter were drawn verbatim from the interviews, direct observations, or institutional documents.

Origins and Overview

By the late 1990s, the proliferation of distance education activities, including the emergence of an aggressive for-profit segment of higher education, had fueled widespread concerns that digital competition could erode traditional student bases and threaten the

well-being of colleges that did not respond quickly and effectively. Institutions also recognized the potential for the burgeoning online world to provide new avenues to reach niche audiences and generate new streams of income. Given the apparent threats and opportunities, the prevailing pattern of thinking within most colleges was not *whether* to invest in the development and delivery of digitally delivered courses and programs, but *how* to enter into the market and do so efficiently and effectively.

For Iowa's fifteen community colleges, the matter of how to respond to the threats and opportunities presented by online learning was approached with a sense of urgency to "get in the game" and "do so sooner, rather than later." In May 1999, the president of Southeastern Community College conceived the idea of establishing a consortium of Iowa community colleges to collaborate in offering an online degree program, and he wasted little time in presenting the concept to all fifteen community college presidents and vice-presidents. By this time, Southeastern had developed a relationship with eCollege, a for-profit learning management system (LMS) provider that was eager to establish its product as the platform of choice at colleges and universities across the country. eCollege, foreseeing the business potential for the Iowa collaboration, put considerable incentive grant money on the table to help get the Iowa initiative off the ground. During the discussions and negotiations about the possibility of collaborating together to offer online courses and programs, eight of the fifteen community colleges "just kind of dropped away"--a decision that, according to a number of the Oversight Committee members, several of the non-participating colleges "now regret."

The seven remaining institutions decided to participate in what became the Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCOC). Initially conceived primarily as a way to share resources, the consortium quickly developed into a comprehensive distance education organization through which all of the seven member college's online credit courses and programs now flow. The ICCOC provides the member institutions with expertise, technical infrastructure, instructor training and support, student support, a registration system, a centralized web site, and budget information. From its genesis, all aspects of the ICCOC have been shaped and influenced by the work of the Oversight Committee, described by one interviewee as "the key reason everything has worked."

Factors Contributing to the Creation of the ICCOC

The seven colleges that collaborated in the formation of the ICCOC were confronted with similar concerns about the threats of escalating competition at the same point in time. The threat of new competitors and the potential loss of students had created a sense of urgency to take action. Following initial approval at the president's level, representatives from the seven colleges convened to talk about the basic dilemma. Todd, a distance education administrator, characterized the tenor of the early discussions: "It was very much, 'If we don't do this, somebody else will do it for us. Or to us. They'll take our students away.'" Jim, a chief academic officer, described the initial planning sessions as including "an awful lot of discussion about competition, and that if we weren't there at the table, we were going to be out of business."

In addition to shared concerns about competition, the “newness” of the venture and the fact that those involved came to the table with an open mind were identified as factors in getting the effort started. As Jim explained:

Generally, community colleges are pretty independent, and some are very competitive--very competitive. But this process was interesting in the sense that it was pretty collegial. My theory is that it's because most of us didn't really understand what we were getting into. Because none of us were really doing much in online education, there wasn't a lot to risk. So that sort of set the tone for people to say, “Okay, if we had to do this . . .” It was sort of, we've not done this before, so therefore there wasn't a lot already embedded in the process. We weren't holding on to: “It's got to be this way.”

All seven colleges entered into the discussions with the same general belief that the best strategy to combat threats from other colleges and meet the needs of students would be to develop an entire degree online, rather than simply providing an array of courses on a shared website. Individually, each was faced with the same dilemma of how to come up with the necessary financial and human resources to quickly create and launch a marketable degree program. In particular, the costs of establishing and maintaining the technology infrastructure (learning management system) and the personnel costs associated with developing and supporting a comprehensive online distance education program presented serious barriers to each of the seven colleges. The institutions were also concerned with the fact that they could not, working individually, produce a full complement of distance education courses with their respective pools of available faculty members. In addition, there was worry that for some courses, an institution may have a difficult time mustering enough enrollments to recoup the associated costs.

Faced with resource constraints from within, the idea of collaborating with other colleges provided a logical avenue to explore. In explaining the forces that influenced their college's decision to collaborate other interviewees offered similar responses, such as: "to save money," "to share resources and expertise," "increase our capacity to compete," "to respond more quickly to the competition," and "it allowed us to get in that game and play it at a high quality with a reduced up-front cost." Oversight Committee members were consistent in their descriptions about why the group convened:

None of us felt we were in a position to drive this thing completely on our own. We all knew that we didn't have the resources to create an online program, an online associate's degree, on our own with the instructors we had, with the technology we had. I think all seven of us were looking for a vendor or a way to do this outside of ourselves. We were worried about server space and staffing. (Todd, distance education administrator)

We certainly couldn't, at that point, just afford to go out on our own and offer a comprehensive mix of online courses. So, I think, the partnership evolved because some players backed out, and those that stayed recognized this was one way to get into the online distance education methodology. (Ross, chief academic officer)

To summarize, the collaborative approach was widely viewed by the members of the Oversight Committee and consortium staff members as a potential way to share resources, save money, gain efficiencies, and improve competitive position.

In addition, a recurrent theme mentioned during interviews as a factor in the startup phase of the consortium was "seed money" proffered by eCollege, "an eLearning software and services provider." eCollege, a for-profit organization that competes with other learning management system providers such as WebCT and Blackboard, works with post-secondary institutions "to build and support online campuses, courses and learning supplements." Their decision to provide a considerable grant to the group reduced the

initial financial risk and up-front investment for each college. With little to risk monetarily, the colleges were able to engage in the planning process without encountering the potentially distracting concern about how the pilot project would be funded.

Growth and Success

The first ICCOC course was offered in the summer of 2000 with an enrollment of 16 students. In the fall 2000 semester, the ICCOC offered 11 different courses with 272 enrollments. Advancing in time to the spring 2005 semester, more than 150 courses (269 sections) were offered with a total of 5,950 enrollments. The perspectives of the people serving on the Oversight Committee, the group charged with the planning, administration, and operation of the ICCOC, will be discussed in greater detail in subsequent sections, but during the interviews with these individuals, they consistently expressed great pride both in the growth of the organization, as well as the way in which it was created and has continued to operate--through the process of collaboration. They spoke with awareness of the unique nature of their success, communicated a strong desire to see it continue, and viewed the future of the consortium as bright. The participants consistently described the organization in positive terms, such as, "tremendous success," "one of the most innovative efforts, I've ever been involved in," and "the most fun any of us have ever had in education." Clark, a chief academic officer, depicted the overall sense of accomplishment in this way:

It's just really been incredible. I'll tell you what, it's not like anything I've ever seen, to bring seven community colleges together--I don't care what size--and have the amount of decision-making that we've had, and just the logistical dynamics of the whole thing in putting it together and then to grow like we have.

The growth and accomplishments of the ICCOC have been recognized by outside professional organizations, as well. In recognition of its accomplishments, The Iowa Distance Education Association (IDLA) presented the ICCOC the Point of Presence Award in 2001 and the Innovators Award in 2004 (Iowa Distance Learning Association, n.d.). Staff members of the ICCOC have presented the story of the collaboration at numerous national and state conferences. As word about the consortium has spread, college and university representatives from around the country have routinely contacted the ICCOC's director, some expressing interest in "replicating the ICCOC in their state." Recently, the ICCOC was awarded with a 1.5 million dollar Title III grant--one of only two grants award in the nation to collaborative entities.

The path for the ICCOC has not been without challenges, however. The organization has withstood an accreditation review, a change in directors, and turnover in a number of the representatives serving on the Oversight Committee. The Consortium recently renegotiated their contract with eCollege, the ICCOC's learning management system provider. In addition, the Oversight Committee has worked their way through a number of thorny operational issues, complicated by differences among the seven home-campus systems in areas such as faculty contracts, financial accounting systems, and registrar functions. In particular, the Oversight Committee was able to resolve a contentious issue, referred to as "course origination rights" (discussed in more detail in a later section), that had raised serious questions about the future of the collaboration. Despite the challenges and barriers that have been encountered, the Oversight Committee,

with support and effort from personnel from each home campus, has created a robust, sustainable collaborative organization.

In the remainder of this Chapter, I provide an analysis and description of the factors contributing to the viability of the ICCOC. Factors emerged from the data that were related to organizational purpose, inputs, structures, processes, leadership, and perceptions about the overall performance of the organization.

Agreement on Dual Purpose, Mission, Strategies, and Primary Goal

One of the key factors contributing to the viability of the ICCOC is firm agreement and a common understanding among the players about the purpose, mission, key strategies (guiding principles), and a fundamental goal of the organization. When asked what they believe the purpose of the ICCOC to be, the members of the Oversight Committee consistently responded that the organization exists to serve the needs of students through the provision of online courses and programs. Steve, the current ICCOC Director, described the group's shared purpose in this way:

I think we all have a common purpose to be successful, to offer the best we can to students. Everything we do, we still come back and say, 'how is this going to impact our students in a positive way?'

Ronald, a CAO, explained the way in which a common understanding of purpose lends focus to the group's efforts:

We leave our territorial issues behind, which is really unique, because so many times we're worried about enrollments at our school, enrollments in our programs, and micro issues, and then you walk into that consortium committee meeting and you leave that behind, and everybody does. And then you move forward with, "What's the best way we can serve the students?"

The ICCOC's mission statement (Appendix A)--"To offer quality educational opportunities to students supported by a comprehensive set of student services"--places student needs squarely at the center of the organization's efforts. The ICCOC's emphasis on the shared purpose and mission was reflected by this description of the group's focus offered by Trudy, a distance education administrator and member of the core staff:

We never said the Consortium as an entity is the most important thing. In other collaborations, there is usually some big thing--some center or institute in which people collaborate. Now, maybe the institute itself is vital, but this thing is about delivering education to students.

The purpose and mission of the ICCOC are closely aligned with the missions of each member college, complementing a deep, longstanding interest by community colleges in expanding access to educational opportunities. The community college system in Iowa has a lengthy history of pursuing "new ways to deliver education" by way of satellite campuses, PBS Telecourses, and interactive television courses offered over the Iowa Communications Network. Broadening the delivery methods into the realm of online courses represented a natural progression in response to new technologies and student expectations for flexible learning options.

While "meeting the needs of learners" was the most frequent first response by interviewees when they were asked about the purpose of the organization, a second theme emerged from the data. In addition to the focus on meeting the needs of students, a collective awareness has existed that the success of the ICCOC is also dependent on its ability to concurrently meet the needs of each member college. The ICCOC's Statement of Understanding (Appendix A) suggests this dual purpose with its mandate to "recognize

the individuality of each participating institution whenever possible, at the same time working toward similarity in process for the convenience of students.” The Oversight Committee members have made deliberate efforts to strike a balance between respecting the individuality and autonomy of each institution and its ways of doing things with the need to work toward standardization in policies and processes that benefit the students. Ethan, a distance education administrator, described the on-going push and pull between these intersecting purposes as “the delicate dance we’re always trying to work through.” The ability of the consortium to deftly balance its efforts to meet the needs of students with the needs of its member institutions has been a critical factor in its viability.

Clarity within the organization about the dual purpose of the ICCOC in meeting both the needs of students and the needs of member institutions has provided an important point of reference as the Oversight Committee and consortium staff members have discussed, negotiated, and reached consensus on some key operational strategies, referred to by the ICCOC as “Guiding Principles.” The following principles have provided direction in the design and operation of the ICCOC.

1. Incorporate institutional missions of all consortium partners.
2. Combine existing resources, which include faculty, services, staff, and information technology at all member colleges.
3. Ensure academic rigor and quality in all courses and the overall program.
4. Provide staffing to accommodate the needs of students, instructors, staff, and the ICCOC in general.

5. Provide standards and accountability for the development and delivery of online courses, as well as student assessment.
6. Provide processes and mechanisms for evaluating all aspects of the program.
7. Administer an informational web site that delivers student services to online students, serves as faculty training resource, and provides current and accurate information to all users.

In addition to the common purpose and agreed upon principles, the people involved with planning and overseeing the efforts of the ICCOC (with support from their respective institutions) share a common goal of increasing enrollments and developing new online programs, for example, in career and technical areas. The importance of the goal to increase the ICCOC enrollments was evident in an observation by Robin, a core staff member, that during meetings of the Oversight Committee, members have been “quick to point out” that “a lack of growth is the beginning of the dying process.”

Genuine agreement and buy-in with respect to the dual nature of the organization’s purpose, mission, supporting strategies and principles, and a shared goal to expand enrollments and program offerings have provided a critical context that has influenced all aspects of the organization.

Inputs Influencing Viability

As an organizational system, the ICCOC receives key inputs in the form of human resources, financial resources, student characteristics, and characteristics of member institutions.

“The People Involved”

When interviewees were asked about what they believed have been the key factors contributing to the viability of the organization, a reference to “the people involved” occurred in virtually every interview. Clark, a chief academic officer and one of the original Oversight members, reflected the tenor of responses with his statement: “Success can be attributed to the people . . . I really believe it’s the people that we have and have had from day one.” The interviewees indicated that the people involved with the Consortium, including faculty members, Oversight Committee members, and front-line people within each of the home institutions have provided high levels of energy and competence that have contributed directly to the viability of the consortium.

In particular, the talents and work ethic of the Consortium’s “core” staff members (staff members who are paid, at least in part, by the Consortium) were frequently mentioned as a key factor contributing to the success of the organization. For example, Corey, a chief academic officer, stated that: “One of the driving forces of the consortium --the people we depend most heavily on--are the consortium core staff members . . . all are outstanding and do a great job of what they are doing.”

An important aspect with regard to the impact of human resources on the Consortium’s performance is that contributions have not been concentrated at any one institution; rather, “talent has emerged from all the organizations.”

We have some incredible people who manage. . . it’s mushroomed and grown to the degree that it’s almost like running a separate educational institution over there on the side that we all tie into. So, the people that we have in the positions to run the show do a remarkable job . . . We have some incredible people all across the

consortium. I can't think of anybody that just doesn't have incredibly competent people handling the detail work on the inside. (Clark, chief academic officer)

In addition, the experience, expertise, and skills of instructors were viewed by participants as critical inputs into the system. The infusion of content expertise provided by each of the faculty involved has formed the foundation of the ICCOC's work.

According to Steve, the Consortium Director:

... without instructors offering quality courses and doing a tremendous amount of work, the consortium would not be successful. The original folks involved did a great job of picking the right faculty members, because that's really where the rubber meets the road. The faculty who got involved and are still involved constantly ask 'what can they do better?'

Considering the impact of human resources at the group level (discussed in greater detail in the section describing group processes), a recurrent theme that emerged in explaining the ICCOC's success was "the right mix of people" on the Oversight Committee who work well together. Robin, a member of the consortium core staff, described the positive chemistry within the group in this way: "We've got a great group of people—a good mixture of personalities who are willing to work with each other." Interviewees attributed the positive chemistry among group members, in part, to the value the individuals involved placed on the "idea of distance education and online learning" as well as possessing a strong personal interest in "playing in this arena" of distance education. In addition, the element of "chance" was also mentioned repeatedly as one of the factors in a "convergence, fortunately, of people who wanted this to happen."

The time and energy contributed by members of the Oversight Committee have been instrumental in making the collaboration work. The deep interests in distance

education and positive team chemistry have generated what one person described as a common interest in considering “what each person can do to keep things moving forward.” In summary, the effort has benefited from a “dedication of all the people involved,” with “people who are very committed to this, very pleased with where it’s gone. As Clark, a chief academic officer, reflected:

The dedication of the people that I really consider are the nuts and bolts people of the organization is incredible. And, I’m talking not only dedicated, but they are energized. They are incredibly enthusiastic about what they are doing. Their level of dedication to this project is phenomenal.

Considered from an individual level, the Consortium’s success and the relationships that have been formed have great meaning, personally, to each member of the Oversight Committee. The importance of the project to the individuals involved is illustrated by these comments:

In my experience, and I think you’ll find this across the board if you talk to everybody, it’s been one of the most progressive and enjoyable projects most of us have probably experienced in education.” (Clark, chief academic officer)

It’s been the best part of my life for the last five or six years. It really is the most fun and rewarding and productive. It bears the most fruit for my institution. It clearly is the single most successful single project I’ve been involved in. And this friendship thing is on its own level and is a really rewarding thing for me. (Ethan, distance education administrator)

To me, that’s really rewarding, knowing that many people are benefiting from something we’ve worked on and believe in, so I guess personally that’s been the best for me. And, the people on the Oversight, overall, they’re good friends of mine, so it’s kind of like a small family (Trudy, core staff member and distance education administrator)

Most of the individuals interviewed described their involvement with the Consortium as one of the most rewarding and enjoyable aspects of what they do

professionally. When asked about their personal experience in working with the Consortium, the participants responded in terms such as “very, very positive,” and “rewarding.” One person described her experiences as “the most fun I’ve had in education.” Another stated: “It’s the favorite part of my job . . . going to the Consortium meetings, working with the Consortium people.”

Healthy Finances

As stated previously, the seed money provided by eCollege was identified as an important factor in reducing risk and solidifying the startup effort. A second financial factor that has been critical in sustaining the ICCOC has been the fact that the amount of money generated from tuition has provided sufficient revenues to fund operations without requiring any additional financial inputs from member colleges. Unlike many distance education consortiums that receive state appropriations or charge member dues, the ICCOC has done neither due to its financial self-sufficiency. The direct operating expenses for the Consortium have been covered by diverting a portion of the tuition collected from each enrollment to the ICCOC’s budget. A lean operating budget has been possible due to sharing the modest staff positions funded by the ICCOC, a favorable rate negotiated with eCollege for key support services (possible because of the high volume of enrollments), and minimal money expended on advertising.

Even though the Consortium has been financially solvent, an additional financial input, a \$1.5 million Title III grant awarded by the Department of Education in 2004, will allow the ICCOC to invest in several innovative projects they could not have otherwise undertaken. The supplemental funding will be used to train a cadre of faculty trainers,

mentors, and advisors who will provide training and support to others; identify “best practices” that may be integrated into professional development activities at all seven colleges; develop faculty training materials; and establish processes aimed at improving better advising and student support services.

Characteristics of Students

One of the critical inputs that intersects with the ICCOC’s purpose, strategies, structures, and processes are the characteristics of the students who take the courses--their background, personal circumstances, preparedness, motivation, and expectations. These characteristics, including a degree of comfort with technology and significant employment and family responsibilities help explain why large numbers of students have been attracted to the flexibility afforded by the ICCOC’s courses.

The Iowa Community College Online Consortium conducted an internal survey of 2535 students enrolled in the spring 2004 semester. Results indicated (a) 74% were female, (b) 87% of students ranked themselves as “intermediate,” “advanced,” or “expert” computer users, (c) 52% were age 24 or younger (d) 60% worked more than 20 hours per week, (e) 28% were enrolled only in online courses, and (f) 83% were taking 1 or 2 online courses. An additional finding--that 69% of the students enrolled in an ICCOC online course reported they would *not* have taken the course if they would have had to take it face-to-face on campus--was cited by a number of participants in discussions about how the ICCOC meets student’s needs.

An open-ended question on the spring 2004 survey asked students why they chose to take an online course. The responses provide insights into how the ICCOC courses are

perceived by students as meeting their needs. Students frequently mentioned a benefit oft associated with online learning--the flexibility it provides in helping them to further their education. The need for flexible learning options was frequently cited in the context of juggling the demands of work and children. Illustrative comments regarding the advantages of ICCOC's program included: "fits into my busy life schedule," "so I could be more flexible to work," "freedom to access it whenever I have time," "flexibility of study times," "flexibility with work and family," and "saves on travel time."

A notable finding emerging from the interviews was that the majority of the students enrolled in the online courses were considered by administrators to be "part of the institution's traditional population base." In other words, while a few students enrolled in online courses live outside the community college's geographic region, the clear majority of students live within the member institution's traditional service area. The heavy concentration of local students was attributed to the fact that no advertising had taken place beyond including the online courses in the schedules of classes, the Consortium's website, and word of mouth.

When probed about this statistic, the Oversight members responded that, had the ICCOC not made online educational opportunities available, "These students would have found another college that offered them." The assertion seems to be substantiated by the Consortium's internal survey data. When students were asked, "If the online class in which you are enrolled in was not available online through the Iowa Community College Online Consortium, would you enroll elsewhere?" 47% responded "yes." So, while meeting student needs has been pronounced as the primary purpose of the consortium, the

collaborative effort has also been viewed as a defensive strategy, consistent with the needs of the institutions, to prevent the loss of enrollments to other online education providers.

Characteristics of the Member Institutions

The ICCOC includes member colleges that are considered small, medium, and large with respect to total enrollments. Located in both urban and rural areas, the institutions are geographically dispersed around the perimeter of the state. As mentioned in the overview of the organization, the common connection among the institutions was a shared dilemma--how to become engaged in online learning quickly and efficiently in light of competitive pressure and limited resources. As the current ICCOC director explained:

We all knew that we didn't have the resources to create an online program, being able to offer an online associates degree . . . on our own, with the instructors we had, with the technology we had. We just couldn't do it. It would have taken too large of an investment for us to do it on our own. Our thinking, then, was why do it on our own; why invent the wheel when we can go together and share the cost of the project? And that is what happened.

Another key characteristic shared by the member colleges is that they all voluntarily joined the effort to collaborate. Cathy, an academic officer, described the impact of institutional self-selection in this way:

I think this is the seven who wanted to really benefit, versus state-wide consortiums that include all their institutions. If the state chooses to go that way and say, "Everybody's going to be in this online consortium," then I think, automatically, you're going to have people who don't really want to be there. And, then, that's always going to be a fight . . . to get them to come along and agree or whatever. Well, I think it's a shame only seven out the total community colleges in Iowa participate, but yet, maybe that's what ended up making it work, because we're the ones who said, 'Let's do it.'

A number of people interviewed echoed the sentiment that the voluntary nature of the collaboration (in contrast to state-wide, mandated consortia) was a key factor in the viability. The common perception among the participants was that, having volunteered to work together to respond to the threats and opportunities presented by online learning, the initial commitment to collaborate and a positive attitude about the concept carried over as the details of the arrangement were worked out. On the flip side, the absence of reluctant partners was seen as having a positive influence in reducing the potential for conflict.

Structural Factors Influencing Viability

If we ever grow big enough and become formalized and we become a bureaucracy, we're in trouble. Right now we can all sit around the table with our coffee or Mountain Dew in our hands, and say, "Okay. What are we going to do about this?" (Gabriel, consortium core staff member and distance education coordinator)

Overview

Structural factors--including how work has been divided, how it has been coordinated, and the policies that frame activities--have had a direct influence on the viability of the ICCOC. The structural possibilities for the ICCOC were narrowed by a pivotal decision made by the seven college presidents made early on, "that the consortium can never become its own entity." From the beginning, the presidents excluded from consideration a model in which the Consortium would "become Iowa's sixteenth community college" by offering its own courses and granting degrees apart from the member institutions. One Oversight member, Jim, quoted a declaration from his president that reflected the clear position on the matter:

We don't need a sixteenth community college. We don't need an online college. These courses have to be bought into by the faculty locally. They have to have some confidence in them.

As a result of the parameter set forth by the presidents, the consortium was planned and designed with the understanding it should serve as a mechanism for each institution to offer online courses and award degrees. Integrating the work of the ICCOC with the structures and processes in place at each of the seven member colleges was part of the plan from the beginning.

Working within the boundary established by the president's group, the Oversight Committee developed some "basic" operating structures and agreed-upon processes that are outlined in their Statement of Understanding and Bylaws (Appendix A). The straightforward content and tenor of these documents (with a notable lack of legalese) set the stage for a collegial rather than a bureaucratic relationship among the colleges. The declaration, "This document is not intended as a contract but rather a statement of understanding . . ." reflects an overarching emphasis on striving for understanding and building positive relationships, rather than relying on extensive policies and procedures to govern activities.

Several participants in the study pointed out the fact that the ICCOC has not been established as a legally incorporated entity; rather, it has operated as a group of colleges that have voluntarily agreed to work together. In describing the relatively loose structural connections among the partner institutions, Gabriel, a member of the consortium's core staff, stated: "We're not mandated. We don't have a tight charter that binds us. We have common goals that bind us, and some general rules that keep us all playing fair."

In the section that follows, several important structural factors that have impacted the ICCOC's viability are described, including how activities are governed and coordinated, the division of work within the organization, the organization's ability to balance student expectations for standardization and institutional desires for autonomy, and the organization's solid financial footing. In the subsequent section, themes and factors emerging from data involving the ICCOC's processes will be described.

Effective Governance

The ICCOC's bylaws describe one of the key structural elements of the ICCOC, the Oversight Committee, that exists for "the purpose of addressing all issues related to the effective and efficient operation of the consortium." The Oversight Committee, comprised of two to four people from each member college, has charted the direction of the ICCOC, established policies, and designed the structures and processes that frame the work of the organization. The effectiveness of the Oversight Committee, discussed in greater detail in the section detailing "Group Processes," has been a crucial factor in contributing to the ICCOC's performance.

The composition of the Oversight Committee has "encouraged views from different angles." Individual colleges have typically assigned at least one representative from the academic side, for example, the chief academic officer (CAO) or a dean, and a second representative with direct administrative responsibilities in the areas of distance education. Each college can choose to send as many representatives as they wish to the Oversight meetings. Regardless of how many individuals are assigned by a particular institution, each school has just one vote.

In addition to representatives from academic affairs and distance education, the ICCOC Director and the consortium core staff, including a student services coordinator, technology coordinator, faculty trainer, and web-site administrator, serve on the Oversight Committee. Kathy, an academic officer responsible for distance education, described how the composition of the group has helped the organization maintain momentum:

Everybody kind of knows everybody's specialty a bit. There's the person there who's the trainer, and she's got a good handle on how to train the faculty, and we definitely have people who can answer the student services questions at the meeting. And, so a lot of times we can get things answered within a meeting as opposed to some statewide meetings . . . the answers aren't there because people need to go back and talk to staff. And then it kind of breaks the discussion up, and maybe you come back to the meeting in two months or try to email around . . . and emailing around is not always the same as "let's just figure it out now."

While each representative contributes expertise to the Committee, in general, academic officers have provided a "wider institutional perspective relative to distance learning." Participation by the Chief Academic Officers (CAOs) or their designees has allowed many key decisions to be made on the spot. In addition, participation by CAOs has provided expertise and first-hand knowledge regarding issues about curriculum, faculty evaluations, faculty assignments, and finances. In general, the individuals representing their institution's respective distance education operations have furnished knowledge and experience in the operational domains of programming, marketing, student support services, and technology. The consortium core staff brings greater depth of understanding of the daily operation of the ICCOC, in particular, the nuts and bolts of the eCollege learning management system, as well as insights into emerging problems, trends, and issues that need to be addressed at the administrative level.

The formal role of the Oversight Committee was compared to that of an “executive board” that “has entrusted the nitty-gritty, day-to-day operation to the Consortium core staff.” Although the full-time Consortium director, and the consortium core staff who work closely with him, serve as members of the Oversight Committee in an advisory capacity, they also report to the Oversight Committee as a whole. The director and the core staff identify critical issues and trends, present data, and make recommendations to the larger committee. In turn, the Oversight Committee, as a whole, discusses issues until agreement is reached, and then takes action. As linchpins to the home institutions, members of the Oversight Committee carry the banner of the ICCOC to the personnel at their home institutions, from the presidents to the front line individuals – all of whom play important roles in making the Consortium work.

Staffing

The configuration of the Consortium’s core staff represents another important structural design element in the organization. As mentioned previously, the Consortium’s core staff consists of individuals whose salaries are paid entirely, or in part, by the Consortium. As shown in Appendix E, the Director of the ICCOC and the core group that reports to him works primarily with operational issues involving the Consortium that cross institutional boundaries. For example, the director is responsible for handling fiscal arrangements, marketing, and facilitating the Oversight Committee meetings. The website administrator maintains the organization’s website that provides a means to communicate with both students and staff at the home colleges. In addition, all the individuals in the Consortium core group serve as “go-to people” in providing the first

line of support in their respective areas of expertise when personnel from the home institutions need assistance.

Several consortium staff members share an appointment with their home institution (where they are physically housed). The composition of the Consortium core staff is noteworthy in that the group includes people with direct ties to five of the seven member colleges. The director, with 100 percent of his time devoted to overseeing the Consortium, has been housed at Southeastern Community College. Having staff members dispersed around the state has offered the benefit of a more direct tie with the home institutions, as well as solving the more practical concern of how to share positions with member institutions.

The lean staffing structure at the Consortium level has contributed to a relatively modest operating budget for the consortium. The staffing level has been possible, in part, because of a division of labor among the consortium staff, personnel from the home institutions, and the centralized support services provided by eCollege. Individual colleges have been responsible for providing support services for students who are enrolled at their respective institutions, such as admission, registration, financial aid, advising, and the provision of textbooks. In general, the home institutions have absorbed this work load into existing staff responsibilities. However, the growth in enrollments has caused several colleges to express a need to reevaluate in-house staffing levels. The ICCOC staff has provided centralized support to the home institutions by maintaining the website, working with eCollege, interpreting policies, troubleshooting systems problems, and managing the “web interface,” which serves as a gateway to the eCollege system.

The eCollege Learning Management System (LMS)

The decision to partner with eCollege for the technical infrastructure and comprehensive training and support services needed to offer a comprehensive online program was mentioned repeatedly as a key factor in performance of the ICCOC (a point described in further detail in a later section). During the interviews with the Oversight Committee members, positive references to usability, student and faculty support, and reasonable costs occurred repeatedly during discussions about the eCollege system.

The eCollege learning management system used by the ICCOC consists of two primary elements: the course management component and the web registration interface. The course management component supplies an array of resources and tools for instructors to use in designing and teaching courses and provides students with the access and tools to participate. Because all seven colleges use the eCollege platform, the look and feel of all courses is similar, as well as the tools and basic navigation. Rather than having to adapt to a different learning management system for each college (as is the case with some online consortia), students who become familiar with eCollege find familiarity in subsequent online courses, regardless of the originating college.

In addition, administrators use the course management component to collect detailed data about enrollments, student profiles, and evaluation. The web registration interface is an administrative information system hosted by Southeastern Community College that allows core staff at the ICCOC to generate a variety of course records and reports. The interface also provides secure access for individual colleges to create, register, and withdraw students from their home college.

Balancing the Need to Standardize with the Desire for Autonomy

The structural features of the organization reflect the dual purpose of meeting the needs of both students and the institutions simultaneously. The design recognizes not only the sovereignty and unique needs of each college, but also the market reality in which success is contingent on meeting the expectations of students by establishing a degree of seamlessness and uniformity in structures and processes. The ability of the organization to effectively balance these two interests was described by one Oversight member as “nothing short of a miracle.”

In addition to the common “course shell,” the Oversight Committee has reached agreement on some policies that serve as common elements for conducting business. Even though individual colleges operate from different academic calendars, all courses offered through the ICCOC begin at the same time--a date that coincides with the latest on-campus start date among member institutions. In addition, even though member colleges all have different tuition/fee structures for on-campus classes, the group has established a common tuition rate for courses offered through ICCOC at the highest on-campus rate among the seven college campuses. Other standardized features include a maximum number of students in each section, a uniform fee policy for student withdrawals, and the use of a common textbook for each course.

In other domains, for example, in the selection, compensation, and evaluation of faculty members, the framework of the ICCOC allows colleges the latitude to follow their own institutional philosophies and practices. In addition, each college has defined its own policies with regard to issues of ownership of course materials and faculty compensation.

Some institutions compensate faculty for initial course development and/or an “overload” salary for teaching online courses. One institution provided new laptop computers to faculty members as an incentive to teach online. Similar flexibility exists with respect to teaching assignments. Several of the colleges have employed full-time faculty almost exclusively, others have used a combination of full-time and part-time faculty, while at least one has relied primarily on adjunct instructors.

As mentioned previously, the decision was made early in the process that the Consortium would not offer online courses and programs apart from the member institutions. This decision led to a fundamental structural aspect of the Consortium--students enroll for all ICCOC classes at their “home campus”--the college in which they have been admitted and from which they hope to earn their degree. For example, a student may enroll in three ICCOC classes through their home college, but the instructors may be from three different member institutions. With the structure of the ICCOC, the online instructors essentially serve as an adjunct faculty for the six other colleges, although they are paid by their home institution. From the perspective of students, it’s a seamless process. However, because academic policies follow the students, should a problem arise, faculty members must follow the policies and guidelines set forth by the student’s home institution. For example, in an instance of academic dishonesty, the faculty member teaching the course must follow the policies and guidelines set forth by the student’s home institution, not the instructor’s college.

Fiscal Arrangement

Members of the Consortium have agreed to a simple, effective formula for handling the financial aspects of the course. Tuition is billed and received by the each student's "home" institution. For each semester hour of tuition collected, a fixed dollar amount is returned to the Consortium to fund operations. Similarly, the consortium has negotiated a flat amount per credit hour that is paid to eCollege. The remaining balance divided between the college who provides the instructor for the course (approximately 80 percent) and the student's "home" institution (approximately 20 percent). Because the "originating" college shoulders the expenses of hiring and supporting the faculty member, they receive the larger share of the tuition.

This simple financial structure provides financial rewards to the Consortium, eCollege, the originating institution, and non-originating institutions that have students taking classes taught by other colleges. The monetary reward for each party involved for every enrollment has contributed to the shared goal of increasing enrollments. Overall, the participants and member institutions have been satisfied with the way in which finances have been handled. In addition, the financial structure of the consortium has contributed to the shared goal of increasing enrollments, since each enrollment generates additional revenue for each of the partners.

Factors in the ICCOC's Processes Influencing Viability

The ICCOC has numerous key processes and actions that have been performed capably in contributing to the organization's bottom line. The agreed upon structures, described in the preceding section, have provided a framework and boundaries for the

ways in which processes fundamental to the operation of the organization have been provided. Two categories of processes within the ICCOC that have influenced its viability--core operational processes and group processes--will be described and analyzed in the sections that follow.

Core Operational Processes

A set of operational processes within the ICCOC, fundamental in meeting the purpose of the Consortium, have included creating and teaching courses; planning and scheduling offerings; recruiting, registering, and enrolling students; providing student support services; training and supporting faculty and staff; marketing and promoting courses and degrees; and maintaining financial and student records. The ICCOC's pattern of rapid growth in enrollments, its financial self-sufficiency, internal feedback collected from surveys of students and instructors, and data gathered during the interviews provide evidence that task core processes of the ICCOC have been capably carried out.

The ICCOC's approach to marketing is noteworthy. Although new efforts to promote the consortiums programs are being undertaken, very little money and energy has been expended to attract the large numbers of students. For example, in a budget of \$245,700 for 2002, only \$1000 (less than .5 percent) was earmarked for marketing. As mentioned in the description of student characteristics, the vast majority of those enrolled in ICCOC courses were considered to be part of the colleges' traditional population base. To promote the online program, the consortium has relied primarily on word-of-mouth advertising, their website, and the member college's traditional schedules of classes.

Attracting large numbers of students without spending money on advertising has contributed to the financial viability of the consortium.

The decision to partner with eCollege in providing operational support emerged from the interviews as a recurrent theme in explaining the consortium's success. Steve, the consortium director, described the quality of eCollege's support services in this way:

We have a working relationship with our learning management system, eCollege that, right now, I would not trade. The way they support us, the way we have access to them . . . they are incredible to work with. They are an extension of our staff completely.

The belief that eCollege, has been a "critical partner" in making the Consortium work (it's "like having someone on-campus") was echoed by chief academic officers, distance education administrators, and the consortium core staff. This quote from Gabriel, a member of the consortium's core staff, reflects the general sentiment shared by the participants:

I think that eCollege has been a huge part of our success. They are a wonderful company. 24 hour tech support has been great for us. They are very responsive to our needs. When we suggest something, they research it, they get back to us. They're a great company.

Described as the "greatest treasure" of eCollege, the 24 hour technical support services they have provided were viewed as a vital part of the success, not only because of responsiveness to students and faculty who have called the help desk or e-mail online support, but also freeing up time for the consortium staff to work on other facets of the organization. Both students and ICCOC staff members judged the quality of technical support from eCollege to be very high. As an example, the Director of the ICCOC indicated that the average wait time to speak with a live person at the eCollege help desk

was an average of 1.5 minutes – shorter in duration, on average, than the wait time for 911 emergency services for Denver, CO (the location of eCollege’s headquarters).

The ICCOC, under the guidance of the current and past directors, has demonstrated a pattern of continually seeking out ways to improve the core operational processes. From the ways in which students are informed about courses, through disseminating the results of final course evaluations, the Oversight Committee has continually sought out ways to “continuously improve the consortium.” Robin, a member of the core staff, explained the group’s interest and motivation in this way:

If we don’t continue to work to grow and improve, what might seem like the status quo could actually be the beginning of the end of the consortium, so that helps everybody keep in mind that we need to fix things, improve things, look for ways to keep the group strong . . . rather than just saying, “Yes, we’re doing a good job, great.” Resting on laurels is not really accepted.

In conjunction with efforts to improve, detailed data has been collected by the organization to help guide decisions and make adjustments. The ICCOC has taken advantage of the capacity of the eCollege learning management system to collect detailed feedback about the organization’s performance. The ICCOC director provided an illustration of how data is collected and used to seek out ways to improve the performance of the organization:

We’ll look at that number, and say, “great, 96 percent of our students are satisfied or very satisfied with the help desk . . . great.” But, why are 4 percent dissatisfied? And while 96 percent is great, and it’s important, we still want to know why 4 percent are not satisfied. We try to find answers like that.

From the first full semester of operation, the ICCOC administrative team has collected data for a number of “critical factors” that have been identified to help gauge

student perceptions of their experiences in online courses. The factors include an overall reaction from students, as well as the degree of satisfaction with the online system, support services, the learning environment, the instructor and the course. Appendix D provides a comparison of these factors for each fall semester, 2000 through 2004. The indicators suggest that student satisfaction with their online experience has been quite positive. For example, 92% of the students enrolled in the fall 2004 semester indicated they were very satisfied/satisfied with their online education experience--a statistic that has been quite consistent across semesters.

A recurrent theme in the operational processes of the organization was attention paid to the provision of instructional support for online instructors. The ICCOC has taken a comprehensive approach in offering training, resources, and support for faculty who teach online courses. A part-time faculty trainer has been employed by the ICCOC to serve as a resource for all online instructors and coordinate training activities. A menu of faculty support services had been available through several means and in a variety of formats:

1. eCollege--help desk, training manual, training course, newsletter, technical support
2. Individual Colleges--in-house mentors and staff development opportunities
3. Web Resources--library resources, best practices sessions, newsletters/tips, links to outside resources
4. Annual Conference--presentations for both beginning and advanced instructors

5. Best Practices Sessions--discussion of online teaching strategies, issues, and trends
6. Faculty Handbook--information about standards, textbooks, training, contacts, copyright, evaluation, grading, rosters, student concerns, etc.

In addition, each semester, the ICCOC Director surveys all online instructors about their experiences. The results of the survey are used to improve services, enhance resources, and make recommendations to eCollege and the Oversight Committee.

Another example of an effort to enhance core processes is the creation of a position of student “concierge” as part of the Title III grant. The role of this person will be to help diagnose troubleshoot and solve problems in the area of student support services. Other evidence of the effort to continuously improve processes was found in a complex project involving changes in each campus’s registration system to eliminate the need for a dual registration system.

Group Processes

I mean . . . we’ve got some bylaws and stuff, but mostly there is an attitude of “let’s get along; let’s figure out how to do this.” (Ronald, chief academic officer)

Agreement about the purpose of the organization and decisions about strategies, purpose, structures, and operational processes have all emanated from group processes--the ways in which the members of the Oversight Committee have interacted and communicated with each other. It follows that the effectiveness of group core processes through recurring cycles of discussion, negotiation, compromise, and agreement has been a critical factor in both the initial success of the Consortium and its sustainability. The

extent to which the group involved with the planning and operation of the ICCOC has been able to work together effectively has been influenced a number of factors within the patterns of interaction within the Oversight Committee.

In a broad description of how the Oversight Committee has worked together as a group, Jim, a CAO who has served on the Oversight Committee since its inception stated: “There isn’t any question in my mind, it has been the most collegial group I’ve ever worked in, in any of the dealings that I’ve had across the state.” Rachel, a CAO who is relatively new group member, remarked that, “There is that feeling of people being comfortable with each other. If we have a problem, we’ll pick up the phone and try to work through it.” Another long-time member of the Oversight Committee, Vance (CAO) attributed part of the success of the ICCOC to the “‘kind’ operating mentality the group has in relationships.” Steve, the current ICCOC director described the group dynamic in this way:

When we talk about the Oversight Committee, we talk about a group of people who are very loyal to one another, people who trust one another. We’re friends. . . those are some pretty strong bonds that help hold us together.

Respect and Trust. When participants were asked about the key factors that have contributed to the group’s ability to work well together, the word “respect” was mentioned in almost every conversation. The theme of respect was identified in the context of both inter-institutional and interpersonal relationships. For example, Ross, a chief academic officer, suggested the overall success of the group be attributable to a pattern of showing respect to others:

Maybe the one reason why the consortium has hung together more than anything else is that no one has tried to force their will on anybody else. There has been an amazing amount of respect.

Mary, an academic officer, mentioned the importance of interpersonal respect when “concerns or problems” have arisen: “I think everyone maintains that level of respect, and it doesn’t get down to, ‘Hey, you should do this. Or, this is nuts that you’re doing that.’”

When asked specifically what was meant by the term “respect” within the ICCOC, Ethan, a distance education administrator, provided a rich perspective into how the concept has been put into practice within the group:

We take great pains, all of us, the chief academic officers and distance learning people . . . we all take great pains to respect the territorial rights of each other. No one ever tries to suggest anything that would in any way imply an impingement on someone’s territorial rights--in other words, the traditional internal values of each of the colleges . . . and that’s a tricky dance to do. That approach so much dictates what happens, because it’s this constant dance we do to try to move forward and try to find new ways to collaborate and still respect traditional territorial rights. It all comes down to that. Everything we do is about that.

There are very few times when we meet in person or by phone when there aren’t a few minutes of discussion about an issue that gets dicey. Because you’ve got to push the boundaries and there’s always somebody at one end of the continuum that raises an issue that gets someone else’s back up, who then gets nervous about what is going on and doesn’t agree with what the other six are saying. That does happen. It happens all the time. And we’re very, very good at dealing respectfully with it. And, basically, what happens is that we respect the views of that person whoever it is. We defer to them.

The core value of trust--a confidence in the character and competence of the personnel, institutions, and processes involved--has gone hand in hand with respect. Trust and a sense of confidence, both interpersonally and inter-institutionally, have permeated relationships at all levels of the organization. From an institutional perspective, the

“Statement of Understanding” underscores the importance of trust and goodwill in making the arrangement work. As mentioned previously, rather than relying on legal terms and conditions and tightly written procedures to dictate the terms of the relationship, the group has strived for mutual understanding.

The level of trust among the institutions has also been reflected by the staffing and fiscal structures. From the beginning, the Consortium Director and the several key Consortium staff members have been housed at Southeastern Community College, and Southeastern has acted as the fiscal agent for the program. The arrangement was not viewed as problematic by any of the participants. The role that leadership has played in the Consortium’s performance will be discussed in a later section, but a foundation for trust among the players was established early on, and that value has continued to the present, according to Beverly, an administrator of distance education:

From Chuck’s [the ICCOC’s first director] leadership, there was a lot of trust and faith this could work. And he always looked out for the Consortium, not Southeastern, not eCollege, but for the Consortium.

Another example of the trust within the ICCOC has been the willingness of the Oversight Committee to give the consortium director and his staff great latitude in both the day-to-day operations of the Consortium, as well as negotiating details of arrangements eCollege and other vendors. The degree of trust placed in the director and his staff was described by Clark, a chief academic officer, in this way:

The CAOs feel no reason to micro manage this thing. You just let these people [the core staff] do what they do best. And they take care of it. They have the kind of gunner personalities . . . that’s where they thrive. I mean, these are not people that would function well on a short leash. But, you know what? They don’t need to be on a short leash. So, just let them go.

“Basic Diplomacy”. The values of trust and respect have contributed to a prevalent pattern of positive interaction within the ICCOC described by one participant as the practice of “basic diplomacy.” Members have demonstrated competence in applying principles of basic diplomacy in negotiating agreement on a host of potentially contentious issues without creating hostility or hard feelings. Comments from Robin (a consortium core staff member) illustrate the prevailing diplomatic mindset that emerged from the interviews:

I guess what I like about the meetings is that there are times when I’ll disagree with someone else and their idea, and of course, I’ll have to remember they’re coming at it from a different perspective. So we’ve got different view points, and then you can get done with your discussion, and break for lunch and chat and get along. We can leave that disagreement behind. I don’t know whether that’s the right way of saying it, but it’s not taken personally, and that works well – you have to be able to do that.

Ethan, a distance education administrator, offered advice about the role of diplomacy in contributing to effective group processes, as well as the nature of diplomacy in the broader context of higher education:

You’d better get with whatever group of people you’re going to make this deal with and you better spend some serious time . . . to build rapport with them so that you trust each other. It’s really just basic diplomacy. You know it’s what diplomats make a living doing. It’s what businesspeople world wide make a living doing. It’s just that . . . and it’s so ironic to say this, but in the collegiate atmosphere, in the collegiate world, it’s not necessarily automatically *that* collegial . . . not when you’re doing business.

Another key factor that has contributed directly to diplomatic effectiveness within the organization was the absence of competition from within. Internal competition among individuals and institutions has been cited as a contributing factor in problems associated

with inter-institutional collaboration (Neal, 1988). In the case of the ICCOC, competition from within the ICCOC was not perceived as a problem. As Trudy, a member of the consortium core staff and a distance education administrator, explained:

I don't know if you want to call it the personality or the dynamics of the group, but we've never competed. I've never felt like there was competition between individuals or colleges. Which is, I guess, is unusual because the nature of our business would be to compete for students . . . but we don't do that. We share resources well, we share course development, we share training, course origination, and a couple real big plans and ideas we were able to carry through.

Mary, an academic officer, provided a similar observation from her perspective of relative newcomer to the Oversight Committee:

What I was most amazed about is the cooperative nature of that group. You have some very strong personalities in there, but there was not any level of competition or even self-interest for their own institution. The discussions were always based around what is best to fit the needs of our students in the Consortium.

A pattern of interaction without the presence of internal competition was fostered, in part, by the willingness of individuals within the group to contain competitive tendencies and share power. With a group comprised of chief academic officers and distance administrators from seven colleges, it is of little surprise that the group included members with both "strong personalities" as well as those with more "passive" demeanors. Several individuals on the Oversight Committee--described as "drivers" with a natural tendency to take charge, influence, and push ideas--have exercised greater restraint in attempts to exert influence on the group than their natural tendencies dictate.

However, participants were consistent with their assessment that no one had "used their institutional position or personal power to dominate the discussion" and that "nobody really throws their weight around." Rather, a dominant theme that emerged in

the interviewee's descriptions of group processes was shared power in decision making, reflected by the comment: "Basically, we throw out our needs and concerns and look at everybody equally." The theme of shared power was evident at the institutional level, as well, with the shared perspective that none of the partner institutions "has tried to run the show by itself." At least part of the egalitarian behavior was attributed to a degree of social pressure exerted within the group, reflected by the following assertion offered by Trudy (consortium core staff and distance education administrator) that: "On the rare occasion when someone starts getting competitive, one of us jumps right in and calls them on it."

Consensus Decision Making. The foundations of trust and respect and the practice of basic diplomacy within the group have helped to create an environment within the Oversight group that has been conducive to arriving at decisions through the process of consensus. The benefit of strong rapport among group members was evident among the Oversight Committee members and the Consortium staff. Clark (CAO) summarized:

The personalities . . . everything really fits together quite well. And, it has from day one. There's never really been, to tell you the truth, any bickering so to speak or any strong disagreements. It's been consensus decision-making at it's finest. And it's truly a success story.

Ross, another CAO remarked candidly, "I'm not a big believer in consensus decisions, but somehow we've been making it work."

From the beginning, decisions of consequence for the ICCOC have been made through the process of reaching consensus by following a pattern of open discussions and thorough deliberations until agreement has been reached. Under the leadership of the

Consortium's first director, Chuck, the Oversight Committee used consensus building as they worked their way through a series of important decisions that have molded the organization's strategies, structures, and processes and influenced relationships within the group.

When asked to describe how the ICCOC group makes decisions, the themes of thorough discourse and patience emerged in virtually every interview. For example, Robin, a consortium staff member, offered this description of how the group arrives at decisions:

Discussion. A lot of discussion. It's pretty open, but not always agreeing. Sometimes there is dissent. And usually the goal is ... and I think this is what helps ... the goal is always to try to figure out what's going to be the best overall. It's like any other relationship with give and take. Not everything pleases everybody all the time. But it serves the group as a whole the best.

During the interviews, several members from the original Oversight group made a point to mention that no votes were taken during the first few years of working together through a number of difficult foundational decisions. Gabriel, a consortium staff member and distance education coordinator, described the process in this way: "For years, we agreed on things and never took a vote . . . which is interesting. It was very much, 'Can we all agree on this?'" In recent years, the Oversight Committee has voted on occasion, as a matter of record, to "show how we voted," but only after consensus has been reached. The group has not relied on voting as a way to resolve a conflict or make a decision. The value placed on reaching agreement through the process of building consensus is evident in the fact that after more than five years of operation all the votes taken have been unanimous.

Effective Management of Conflict. The organizational values of respect and trust, the effective practice of basic diplomacy, and the use of consensus as a way to make decisions should not be misconstrued as implying that the organization has been without disagreement and conflict. In fact, the ability to effectively manage and resolve conflict has been a key factor in the ability of the group to function effectively. As Cindy, an academic officer involved with distance education, related:

It's a really unique group. I just really enjoy meeting with that group because I know we're going to argue about things, but we know we're going to leave feeling good about what happened.

The following description and analysis of a contentious issue, referred to as "course originations rights," illuminates the way in which the group has effectively managed and resolved conflicts. Beginning in the spring of 2004, the group held a series of discussions to work toward a resolution for the issue of origination rights. Trudy, a core staff member and distance education administrator, described the gravity of the situation as boiling down to a decision whether to "do more collaboration" or "break off and go our separate ways."

The origins of the conflict can be traced to decisions made early in the formation of the consortium as the Oversight group concentrated its efforts on developing an entire Associate of Arts degree available through online courses. As colleges stepped forward with courses they knew would be "deliverable" from their respective campuses, it became apparent that by pooling resources, the goal of offering an entire AA degree online would be quickly realized. Oversight members described the initial process for determining which institution taught what courses:

You came to the meeting and brought with you a set of courses and said, “Well, I’ve got a math person who is ready to go, and we can do this one, and you’ve got that one.” So basically, it was who had what. And not many had a lot. At each college there was only a small group of people ready, but when you put the courses all together, you had enough to be dangerous. (Jim, chief academic officer)

We just sat down as a group and talked about it. I expect that every one of us walked in, in the back of our heads saying, “We want this course.” And we had some experience in some specific courses. It was a very cordial conversation. You know, they took this course, we took this one, and we just went around the room. I don’t remember any arguments about it. (Todd, distance education administrator)

As the enrollments for the Consortium grew each semester, individual institutions retained “origination rights” for the courses they had initially selected. Jim, a chief academic officer, described an important implication that soon became apparent to everyone, that: “In the beginning, if you were the first at the table, you got the spoils.” That is, if demand grew and created the need for 12 sections of Anatomy and Physiology, the college that selected that course originally held the “rights” to offer all the sections that were needed. As enrollments in the ICCOC offerings exploded, it became evident that some colleges had selected courses that attracted large numbers of sections and students, while others had locked into a less lucrative mix. In addition to creating an “imbalance” in enrollments, the practice of retaining origination rights for perpetuity made it very difficult for faculty members from outside the college holding the origination rights to teach the same course online.

With enrollments skyrocketing, “the shades came off” with the realization that some colleges had latched on to courses that were bigger money makers than others, and the relative number of sections offered by each of the institutions was “out of balance.”

Beverly, distance education administrator, described the basic dilemma the Oversight Committee faced:

The issue of origination rights needed to be addressed, and I think it got to the point that we ran into more and more problems with colleges wanting to offer a course that another college had “tied up.” And it just needed to be addressed, because otherwise you would have reached an impasse. So, it’s like anything else, if you ignore the problem, it will not go away. Ultimately, a decision had to be made that might not have been popular at some colleges. It was kind of a line in the sand.

The Oversight Committee met numerous times to work through the problem and ultimately arrived at a workable solution:

So that summer we said we are going to have to adjust that, and we had a long meeting of just sitting at the table and working out and trading some things and placing origination rights with other colleges. And those who had a lot sat back and said, “We’re going to give these rights to you guys who don’t have as many.” It was one of those unusual things. . . .and it was hard for people to agree to. It’s not an easy thing to do when your budgets are tight, and it would be great to have the extra sections, but it was one of those examples where we sat down and worked through it. Steve even gave us the option of doing this over e-mail, but people said, “No, we want to pound it out face-to-face.” (Cathy, academic officer responsible for distance education)

The summer face-to-face meeting defused some of the tension that had built up and prompted serious questions about the future of the collaboration. While the decision “might not have been popular at some colleges,” it proved to be workable. The resolution also solidified the commitment of the group to continue to collaborate together and make the ICCOC work. Trudy, a member of the core staff and a distance education administrator, described the impact of reaching a satisfactory resolution in this way: “We had a good meeting last June that really, I think, was the deciding factor that said, ‘We believe in the Consortium, and we’re going to make it go.’”

The following quote from Ethan, a distance education administrator involved in the ICCOC from the beginning, articulated the ways in which the value of respect and the pattern of persistence within the group have helped the group successfully cope with conflicts and obstacles like that of the issue of origination rights:

We're not necessarily highly effective at resolving problems. We just work really hard at it. I mean the issue of origination rights was on the table for a good year and a half. And we talked about it at *every* single meeting we had. And many of those meetings the dialog was exactly the same as the last one and previous one and the one before that. But we talked about it enough and kept it on the table enough that we just . . . it's just like we wore it out. And I think there was a lesson in that--perseverance. If we have virtues, they are respect and perseverance. We just stayed at some of those issues until they had to be resolved. And I'm not saying we wore somebody's point of view down in it. Because I really don't think we did. But we just kept at it long enough we finally reached a compromise. And I personally think the compromise was reached more simply because we had shown each other enough respect for long enough that the parties involved just kind of gave an inch here and an inch there. And we reached a good compromise on it. We've reached good compromises on every serious issue we've had so far.

The resolution reached regarding origination rights illustrated that the ICCOC was served well with a patient approach by the Oversight Committee in making decisions. In biding its time in resolving this significant problem, rather than rushing to make a decision, the group avoided alienating some of the members. Despite pressures from the external environment to act quickly in adapting to changing conditions, in using consensus decision making, the ICCOC has placed a premium on bringing people and institutions along each step of the way. As Ross, chief academic officer, explained: "If we have disagreement on the Oversight Committee, we kind of say, well, let's just not decide until we can get through it." The virtues of diplomacy, patience and persistence that have

become ingrained within how the organization operates have paid dividends in creating and maintaining positive relationships within the group.

Open communication. A pattern of open communication throughout the organization was evident in the data. An open approach to communication reflects the values of respect and trust and has been a key factor in the ICCOC's ability to resolve conflicts and make decisions collaboratively. A pattern of open communication characterized interactions within the Oversight Committee, as well as those between the front-line staff at the home colleges and the consortium staff members:

That's what I kind of like, you can bring up ideas and nobody really takes it offensively or personally. We just discuss different ideas and work through them.
(Trudy, core staff member and distance education administrator)

We don't always agree, but I think there is always the freedom to disagree.
(Rachel, core staff member)

Sometimes people may think we don't really have control over it, because it's done in Burlington--that's where the staff members are employed. But communication back and forth between and around the colleges is very good.
(Jim, chief academic officer)

The pattern of open communication has contributed to a climate in which participants feel comfortable in communicating openly and honestly about their concerns and ideas. Cathy, an academic officer, described an emphasis within the group to "make sure that people aren't afraid to put things out on the table, and say "this is our concern at our college.""

The open exchange of ideas and differences of opinion has been viewed as sources of creativity and strength, as described by Steve, the current director:

Yes we have disagreements. We have challenges. We have challenges all the time. But I think that going back to the respect that we have for one another, the

openness with which we share ideas. We have an environment – we try to create an environment where it is okay to voice your opinion, and no one is going to jump on you for voicing your opinion. We’re going to listen to it, we’re going to digest it, and we’re going try to take that opinion and form into an action in some way, shape, or form. . . Not every idea is going to be an idea that’s something we can grasp onto, but if we don’t encourage an environment where we can share with one another, we might not hear the idea that will take us to the next level.

In providing an update at an Oversight Committee meeting about an ambitious project involving the integration of the eCollege learning management system and each college’s information technology system, the project leader presented an honest appraisal to the rest of the Oversight committee: “We’re going to have to be patient with each other. It’s going to get worse before it gets better.” This statement is indicative of a pattern of open, honest communication that has characterized group processes throughout the organization’s brief history.

The Consortium staff has taken an active approach in establishing open channels of communication throughout the ICCOC’s organizational network. This strategy was evident in the outreach efforts by the Consortium core staff. Cathy, academic officer and distance education administrator described the approach:

What’s nice is that Steve does a site visit to all the colleges at least sometime within a year time frame. And what he does is meet with the registrars at the college and the advisors and the instructors. He also brings his staff. So, they come and do a whole day or day and half meeting. And we have people come in so they can ask questions and talk about what’s not working or what is working. And it’s real open. And that has really helped.

The on-site meetings were described as an important avenue in establishing trust and rapport across all levels of the colleges. The director, Steve, explained how the

forums provide feedback for efforts to improve the structures and processes of the organization:

We purposefully sit down and say, "We came here today for you to tell us what we need to do better. We want your input." While we certainly enjoy hearing things that people think we're doing well, those things aren't helping us grow, and they aren't helping us improve, so we like to sit down and dialog with these people. What can we do better for you? What are the problems that we have? So the personal touch, getting out and visiting people has been a key to our success. Now, when we're responding back and forth by e-mail, they know us as people.

A benefit of the open channels of communication has been that it has reduced the likelihood of relatively minor issues evolving into serious matters that might undermine trust. Cathy provided an example of how outreach by Steve and his staff helped in heading off a potentially serious problem:

Just last spring, we found out that people were feeling upset they weren't finding out about changes in courses, and they weren't being e-mailed. Steve said, "But, I do that by a bulk email." We found that something in our system was filtering out some of those emails. And if he hadn't done a site visit, we don't know how long we would have gone on grumbling. So the site visits really get down to the day-to-day work. And, if someone is frustrated, that can make or break the consortium. If the registrars start getting upset or the bookstores or libraries, then that's where things could get strained and the consortium's going to get strained.

The ICCOC's Annual Conference represents another example of an open approach to communication. Since 2001, the ICCOC has held an annual spring conference in which faculty members, administrators, and support people involved in the ICCOC are invited to attend a two-day conference hosted by one of the seven member colleges. Attendance at the conference has grown from 60 in 2001 to more than 200 in 2005. The event has served as both an opportunity to share information about operational

issues, best practices, and plans for the future, as well as an avenue to communicate the history, values, and beliefs of the organization.

The website for the ICCOC also reflects an open approach in sharing information. For example, links to meeting minutes have been provided, as well as links to a variety of detailed evaluative data. End-of-Course Surveys from each semester have been available, including a compilation of all student comments, positive and negative. Similarly, a report is provided that shows the distribution of grades by individual college awarded in the online classes, as well as the respective completion and withdrawal rates for each member college.

“Flying under the Radar” and Group Cohesiveness. When asked about why they thought the ICCOC has been successful, the members of the Oversight Committee consistently mentioned they believe that one of the factors in the organization’s success has been it’s ability to “fly under the radar” of their respective presidents. Clearly, given the scope and significance of the consortium’s activities, each college president is well aware of the consortium’s work and achievements. However, the operational details of how the ICCOC works have been less apparent to the presidents, and the members of the Oversight Committee communicated a preference in keeping it that way. The reason--they do not want to run the risk being encumbered by what was referred to as the “bureaucratic systems” within their respective colleges. One president publicly echoed the same basic sentiment--that a key factor in the Consortium’s success has been that the presidents “have kept their noses out if it and just allowed our staffs to do what they do.”

Certainly, each of the college presidents has been supportive of the ICCOC.

However, other than some initial involvement by the president at Southeastern at the very early stages, the presidents have not been deeply involved in the ICCOC's planning and operation. As Ronald, a chief academic officer, described:

Early on the presidents said, "Sure, go ahead and try this online plan.' It was almost a pioneering thing. The presidents said, "We'll provide some money; we'll give you some time, and we'll see what happens." And the group took it and really created something.

Because evidence of success was evident early on, the presidents perceived the program to be working, so "they kept their hands off." In addition, according to Jim, a chief academic officer, another factor in the lack of direct involvement in the early days of the ICCOC was that the presidents "didn't feel like they understood it [distance education] enough to get in the way. So they stayed out of the way. That made a difference."

"Keeping the presidents out of the ICCOC" and "flying under the radar" has been a narrative that has helped the group create and maintain a type of "maverick" identity, with a group described by one consortium staff member as "going into areas of distance education where no one has gone before." The themes of "flying under the radar" and "keeping the presidents out" emerged in interview after interview, reflecting a tight bond within the group and the understandable desire to maintain the control over the organization without interference from outsiders, as well as awareness that successful collaboration requires a mindset and approach at odds with the style of most presidents. The positive view of the presidents' lack of direct involvement was not intended as a criticism of the presidents; rather, it reflects a belief that the attitude and skill set

necessary to make the collaboration work meshes better with people who are more in tune with the art of compromise:

I think the role of protector that presidents seem to adopt really hurts their ability to make collaborative agreements. It's just tougher for them than for the operational people on the ground level. I mean managers like me, distance education directors or chief academic officers, are really more operational people. We've got to make stuff work, and we're used to making compromises on a daily basis. We can't get anything done if we're not good at compromising. So, the oversight committee is just fourteen professional compromisers. That's not what presidents are. (Ethan, distance education administrator)

From a pragmatic perspective, participants also believed if the presidents had been too engaged, "decisions would have been more difficult." As one chief academic officer explained, "I think presidents are presidents -- if you get them too involved, and they get too interested, they are going to tell you how to do it differently." Given the ICCOC's track record, the presidents have seen no reason to intervene – the group has earned their trust and confidence. This trust and confidence have helped reinforce an atmosphere in which the group feels empowered to take actions they feel will increase the ICCOC's competitive position.

Leadership. While leadership by the presidents took the form of a willingness to lend support by empowering and trusting the group to manage the enterprise without interference, the individual leadership provided by two key individuals, Steve and Chuck, emerged throughout the interviews as a key factor in the Consortium's success. Chuck and Steve were described as having different strengths and styles, but their vision, communication and facilitation skills, a strong work ethic, and commitment to the purpose ICCOC were identified as common characteristics that were vital in the

organization's development and performance. In addition, the leadership they have provided was viewed as instrumental in establishing trust in the system and instilling a sense of collective confidence that the organization can overcome problems that arise and continue on its path of strong performance.

When I go back to the beginning, Chuck, to me, is probably one of the key reasons the consortium started out well. He is an incredible leader. He's very insightful, very visionary, and yet very humble. . . and allowed people to take the ball and run with it. Chuck was a good person to really get this off the ground, and Steve has stepped right in there. Steve has his own strengths in the fact that he's very detail oriented and very, very concerned with the quality of what we deliver and other aspects of the consortium. I think both these two individuals have been great. (Trudy, core staff member and distance education administrator).

The great unspoken is the guy who was the first executive director, Chuck. I think he exuded a lot of confidence, and people had a lot of confidence he knew what he was doing. And so, if Chuck pointed it out as a problem, or if Chuck said we've got to deal with this issue, there was an awful lot of trust in him (Jim, chief academic officer).

I think tremendous credit has to be give to the first ICCOC director, Chuck. I think he . . . given his persona and his work ethic . . . and his understanding of technology. He charted an excellent course. And he certainly, I think, deserves a lot of the credit for the rest of us believing it would work. (Beverly, distance education administrator)

Committee members lead in certain specific directions, but as far as the overall leadership and the focus of all that energy, that's been Steve and Chuck . . . We couldn't have done any of this without those two guys at the center of it. (Ethan, distance education administrator).

While Chuck and Steve's leadership was a recurrent theme in the data, the notion of shared power, particularly among the CAOs, was evident as well.

It's hard to describe where the leadership comes from. Steve is very good at keeping us "calm" and that sort of thing, and gives the direction and comes up ideas, and where we should be going and getting us resources. But, it's kind of like it comes from all sites Fortunately, the wisdom of some of our vice-presidents and CAOs is pretty astonishing . . . and their willingness to wait, see

through an idea, back off a little while, make a change, and then go forward.
(Gabriel, core staff and distance education administrator)

Many projects require an individual who is able to coordinate and push it in the right direction. Chuck stepped in at the right time, but give the CAOs and to a large extent the other people in the room credit for not going with their own personal agendas. (Todd, distance education administrator)

“Simple Success”

A pattern of “simple success” and the perceptions associated with it emerged as key factor in explaining how the ICCOC has maintained its viability. Not to be misinterpreted as suggesting that achieving prosperity has been an easy process for the consortium, “simple success” refers to the shared belief of the people involved that the positive outcomes associated with the collaboration provide clear evidence the effort should continue. The ICCOC’s record of attracting large numbers of students, its financial self-sufficiency, the positive feedback received by students and faculty members, and support from the main campuses created what one academic officer described as “a prevailing attitude to make it work at the administrative level, at the executive level, at the middle level.”

In particular, participants in this study shared the perspective that the benefits produced by the ICCOC were “greater than the sum of its parts,” and by “giving up a little, everyone gained a lot.” Todd, a distance education administrator, captured the tenor within the Oversight group with his comment: “I think we all realize that none of us could begin to match by ourselves what we can accomplish together.” Robin, a member of the consortium core staff reflected the power of the group efficacy with her statement:

I guess the other part that has sustained it is a belief that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. I really think that the people involved buy into that. If people quit believing that, then it will quickly fall apart.

The rapidity with which the ICCOC experienced its first tangible measures of success, gauged by the rapid increases in enrollments, is noteworthy. For the first few years of operation, the group experienced a “grace period” in which “no major problems or serious issues emerged” beyond trying to cope with rapid growth. The growth and the perception of a positive bottom line helped to build “solidarity” in the Oversight group and cement commitment to the concept at all levels. Success had quickly become “a virtue itself,” an “inarguable thing”--reinforcing the initial decision to collaborate, the basic architecture of the organization, and the ways in which business was carried out. Ethan, distance education administrator, described the direct influence of “simple success” on group processes in these terms:

No matter what problem would arise at that point, everybody could justifiably say, “hey, look how successful this is. Do you want to screw it up? I don’t think you do, so let’s figure this out.”

In addition, an element of social pressure has been present in which no one has wanted to be perceived as “the cause of the problem and the downfall” of the collaboration. Trudy, one of the original oversight members and a member of the core staff, described the collective interest in ensuring the survival of the organization in these terms:

I think part of it goes back to just how we feel about each other and the consortium and about what has happened. And, when you have great success, like we’ve had, it’s easy to say ‘let’s keep doing it.’ We don’t want to fail. We’ve been successful, but we realize it’s a fragile thing.

As a result of the collective desire to keep the consortium viable, a pattern of continuous discourse has been present in which participants keep the purpose of the consortium prominent in discussions as a lever to move the group forward. The group constantly converses about how the organization can “continue to grow and bring everybody forward.”

In addition, as described in the quotes that follow, the Oversight Committee members frequently remind each other that, should the ICCOC disband, the loss to each institution would be significant.

When we get to points where we think we may not agree, someone says, “You know, we’ve got to decide to work this out, or we might be looking at falling apart in a year.” And then we say, “What do we want?” Then we say, okay, we’ve got to talk about it. Rather than, I guess, people storming off and saying they’re mad and taking their toys and going home. We say, “We’ve got to figure this out.” (Cathy, distance education administrator)

We continually remind ourselves that if this does fall apart, there’s no way any of us could recreate what we’ve got here, even in a couple years time, and have it operating at the present point that we do. So we spend a lot more time trying to figure out how to move forward, but not jeopardize what we already have in place, because we don’t want to kill the goose that’s laying the golden eggs. (Vance, chief academic officer)

The perceptions of success have also reinforced a sense of “control over its direction” and a high level of confidence in the group’s collective ability to work through difficult issues that arise:

I try not to get glassy-eyed about it, but I really feel that we are solid enough now that we can deal with pretty much anything that comes along. . . . We have surmounted a lot of really serious issues, and the thing has been successful. We’re still growing. We’re reaching out with all kinds of new initiatives all the time. We’re really keeping a forward looking thing going on here. (Ethan, distance education administrator)

In reference to the positive group efficacy within the ICCOC, Beverly, an administrator responsible for distance education, provided this description that reflects an awareness of the unique belief and sense of pride in the group's ability to succeed:

We come to work day in and day out to problems we face on our campuses that we can't solve, but when the ICCOC group gets together, it's almost like we're looking at things through a different lens.

Ross, a chief academic officer, provided a similar perception about the group's shared sense of accomplishment in what has been created as a result of the collaboration:

I think at the heart and soul of the consortium, people enjoy doing something different . . . collaborative, across the institutions, where there is something that's bigger than my school versus your school.

The shared confidence, a perception of control, the clear benefits associated with the ICCOC, and a strong sense of shared pride have contributed to a collective drive to achieve and take steps to ensure the effort survives.

Summary

This chapter provided a description and analysis of a wide range of important factors dealing with context, purpose, inputs, structures, processes, and outcomes that have contributed to the viability of the ICCOC. A brief summary of the factors that have contributed to the ICCOC's ability to fulfill its purpose follows.

1. Context. A compelling condition existed in the external environment that encouraged the group to explore the collaboration. The threats posed by new competition and the opportunities presented by online learning compelled institutions to take action and continues to provide a powerful glue that keeps the effort together. Timing was a key element as the partners were drawn

together as they shared the same basic problem--how to respond adequately to the threats and opportunities with limited resources. The fact that the institutions had not already invested in an alternative approach to online education made collaboration a logical strategy to explore.

2. Shared purpose, mission, strategies, and primary goal. Early in the process, the principals reached an understanding about the purpose and mission of the organization and a set of basic principles and strategies that have guided efforts to meet both the needs of students and those of each member institution. In addition, the member institutions have shared the goal of increasing growth in the number of courses, programs, and enrollments.
3. Inputs. Appropriate inputs have provided energy to the organization in the form of talented, committed people; seed money from eCollege; a healthy revenue stream generated from on-going operations; and the characteristics, expectations, and needs of students. The institutions involved have all voluntarily agreed to collaborate and a commitment to the concept of collaborating has been present at all levels within the colleges.
4. Structural Factors. The decision by presidents to steer clear from the creation of an independent virtual entity placed the planning group on a path of integrating the ICCOC within the framework of the member colleges. The ICCOC has been characterized by relatively simple organizational structures emphasizing relationships and understanding, rather than bureaucratic arrangements. The composition and structure of the Oversight Committee has

contributed to an effective system of governance. Because many support services have been integrated into main campus operations and provided by eCollege, the consortium has maintained a lean staffing level. The agreed upon formula for distributing income has provided incentives for each institution. The structures of the ICCOC have achieved a balance between standardization expected by students and the autonomy required by member institutions.

5. Core Operational Processes. The ICCOC has created a capable system of core processes required to operate the enterprise. eCollege, with its 24/7 technical support, was identified as an essential partner in providing exemplary support services for students and faculty. The practice of seeking continuous improvement in all operational facets of the organization has become engrained as part of the Oversight Committee's overall strategy.
6. Group Processes. The ability of the people in the Oversight Committee to work effectively as a group was a critical factor in both the startup phase of the ICCOC and its ability to remain viable over time. Using consensus building as an approach, the Oversight Committee has made sound strategic and tactical decisions. Values of respect and trust permeate interactions within the group, underlying a diplomatic ethos within the group that has been evident in the containment of internal competition, shared power, consensus decision-making, effective conflict management, and an atmosphere of open

communication. A theme of “flying under the radar” illustrates a high degree of cohesiveness within the Oversight group.

7. Leadership. While aspects of shared leadership emerged throughout the organization, the individual leadership provided by the past and current directors has been critical in the viability. In particular, the directors have modeled dedication to the project and helped to create a sense of confidence that the organization can succeed.
8. Simple Success. The outcomes generated by the ICCOC have been embraced by both students and member institutions. The gains achieved through the collaboration have been apparent to the individuals and organizations involved. Early success helped to establish momentum for the organization and, coupled with the fear of losing what’s been created, sparked an ongoing discourse about what the organization needs to do to continue to grow. The perceptions of success have also created a positive group efficacy, a sense of control over its direction, and a shared sense of accomplishment.

The description and analysis of the data offered in this Chapter have provided insights into the factors that have influenced the performance of the organization. In Chapter 5, using systems thinking as a framework, I discuss the findings in the context of previous research and offer an interpretation about what I believe are the most salient lessons emerging from the case. Chapter 5 will also describe implications for practice and ideas for future research.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND FUTURE RESEARCH

In a time of tight budgets, escalating competition, and heightened expectations for increased access to educational opportunities, identifying and pursuing efficient and effective ways of delivering online programs and courses has emerged as an important concern for administrators. Those involved in investigating inter-institutional collaboration as a possible strategy encounter mixed and sometimes contradictory messages. On one hand, collaboration has been cast as a promising approach in reducing costs, expanding services, and demonstrating responsiveness. On the other hand, the work involved in launching collaborative efforts, and then sustaining them, has proven difficult. Glowacki-Dudka (1999) summarized the dilemma concisely with the conclusion: "For all the potential benefits that collaborations offer, the risks and barriers are high" (p. 2).

The problem this case study sought to address is that little is known about the factors involved in making distance education collaborations work. A lack of in-depth research in the field of inter-institutional collaboration has contributed to the problem. For example, gaps in the research have been identified in assessing the effectiveness of inter-institutional collaborations (Epper & Garn, 2003; Twigg, 2003), the dynamics involved in building and sustaining collaborative relationships (Donaldson & Kozoll, 1999), the actual processes involved in collaboration (Glowacki-Dudka, 1999; Legler & Reishl, 2003; Ring & Van de Ven, 1994), and the effects of collaborative processes (Hardy et al., 2003). As a result of a dearth of research, little in the way of a knowledge base exists to

help guide the practice of collaborating across institutions (Austin, 2000; Epper & Garn, 2003; Offerman, 1997).

While research has been undertaken that explored factors associated with failed attempts at inter-institutional collaboration (Offerman, 1985; Katz et al., 2002), little in-depth research was uncovered that examined the factors that help make inter-institutional organizations viable. Given an alarmingly high rate of failure associated with inter-institutional collaborations (Bergquist et al., 1995) and the limited body of research available to help guide efforts (Austin, 2000; Offerman, 1997), investigating the factors that have contributed to the performance of a viable distance education consortium presented a promising avenue to explore. The purpose of this case study, then, was to identify, describe, and interpret the key factors that contributed to the viability of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium--a comprehensive collaborative distance education organization that had demonstrated a pattern of growth and financial sustainability.

The overarching research question that framed this inquiry was: "What key factors, individually and in combination, contribute to the viability of the ICCOC?" Data was collected using multiple sources, including document review, direct observation, and semi-structured interviews. Using the constant comparative method (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003), data was analyzed, and tentative categories and themes were identified. Triangulation, member checks, and researcher reflexivity were used as approaches to help establish and maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

The significance of this study rests with the potential to help close a gap in the knowledge base that has contributed to what Gray (1989, p. 54) referred to as an “underdeveloped” capacity to collaborate effectively across institutions. In the current context of higher education, colleges can ill-afford to miss opportunities to tap into the benefits associated with inter-institutional collaboration or unnecessarily expend resources in efforts that fail due to insufficient understanding of the factors involved in making these arrangements work.

The primary objective of this study was to gain a deep understanding of the factors that have contributed to the viability of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium. Chapter 4 presented the findings arising from the analysis of the data. This chapter offers an interpretation of the findings relative to the research problem and provides examples of how the individual factors described in Chapter 4 have interacted and blended to contribute to the organization’s performance as a whole.

Chapter 5 will include three main sections. First, I will discuss the key findings from Chapter 4 in the context of systems thinking and previous research. Particular emphasis will be placed on linking the findings of the case study with systems concepts to help explain how the factors described in Chapter 4 have blended and interacted to help create a high-performing organization. Two prevalent patterns that have helped define the organization as a whole will be discussed: effective business practices and positive group relationships. In addition, the culture of the ICCOC will be discussed as an overarching pattern that has influenced the performance of the organization. Second, I will discuss implications for practice that emanate from the findings. These implications may provide

guidance for others who are either considering a strategy of inter-organizational collaboration or who may be actively engaged in a collaborative effort. I will conclude Chapter 5 by suggesting some possible avenues for future research.

Systems Concepts and the Case Findings

Chapter 4 provided a detailed description and analysis of the organizational factors in the environment, purpose, inputs, structures, processes, and outcomes of the ICCOC that have contributed to its performance. While Chapter 4 provided an important perspective in identifying categories of factors and specific elements within each, little attention was drawn to the relationships and interactions among the elements. However, the findings and analysis suggest the factors have combined and interacted in complex ways to influence the overall performance of the organization.

In an effort to gain a deeper understanding of what has made the ICCOC work, this chapter explores the interaction among the elements described in Chapter 4 and how they blend and interact to form patterns that influence the behavior of the organization. The goal is to provide a deeper sense of how the organization, as a whole, has become “greater than the sum of the parts.” With this aim in mind, I’ll follow the advice offered by Senge (1990, p. 7) by using a systems approach to expand analytical and interpretive efforts into the realm of “contemplating the whole” to help “make the full patterns clearer.”

Before turning to the discussion of the interplay among the system parts, it is important to briefly revisit the findings reported in Chapter 4 in the context of existing literature. The overarching categories of factors--purpose, inputs, structures, processes,

and “simple success”--are quite consistent with the categories of factors presented in the literature describing inter-institutional collaboration (e.g., Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Similarly, the factors within the categories involving the people, finances, characteristics of the member institutions, structures, and positive group relations (including trust, conflict management, leadership, and open communication) have drawn attention in previous research.

Therefore, one contribution of this study to the knowledge base of inter-institutional collaboration has been to affirm a basic framework of categories of factors that have been shown to be important in explaining collaborative success. A second contribution has been to furnish texture and a rich operational feel in explaining factors within each category and how they have influenced the ICCOC’s performance. This treatment may help others in making inferences about the composition, meaning, and influences of the factors in other contexts.

A third contribution, and the goal of the discussion that follows, is to deepen the understanding about inter-institutional collaboration by recasting and interpreting the findings through the lens of systems thinking. In addition, a number of differences and similarities between existing literature and the findings will be highlighted. To preface the discussion that follows, it is important to note that, while systems references appear sporadically in the literature discussing collaborative organizations (e.g., Berquist, et al, 1995; Kanter, 1994; Winer & Ray, 1994), no research was uncovered that used a systems perspective to analyze collaborative efforts.

An assumption embedded in systems thinking is reflected by Patton's (2002) contention that the complexities in the world in which we live cannot be "fully captured or understood by simply adding up carefully measured and fully analyzed parts" (p. 122). Systems thinking (introduced in Chapter 2) provides an analytical framework to help make sense of the inherent complexities in organizations, with special attention to the role the external environment plays in the survival of living systems. A systems approach also strives for an understanding of the relationships and interdependence of the parts as they impact the whole (Checkland & Scholes, 1999; Hanna, 1988; Katz & Kahn, 1978; Senge, 1990; Wilson, 1984). Stated in behavioral terms, Birnbaum (1988) suggested that "a systems perspective requires us to replace linear thinking with an understanding of how elements and subsystems are connected to each other in nonlinear circles of reciprocal interaction and influence" (p. 47).

The Organizational Parts Revisited

In taking a systems approach, one begins by identifying parts--including environmental influences, structures, processes, and strategies--and then seeking to understand the nature of their collective interaction (Hanna, 1988; Kowszun, 1992). To understand the parts and the nature of collective interactions within an organization, the basic systems model starts with an assumption that all organizations are complex social systems with recurring cycles of gathering inputs, transforming inputs into outputs in the form of products and services, which (hopefully) generate new inputs and energies to sustain the organization (Katz & Kahn, 1978).

Chapter 4 described the factors within the main parts of the ICCOC in the organization's context, purpose, inputs, the structures and processes that have framed the production of output (online courses and support services). In addition, the strategies that helped guide the ICCOC's cycles of events and activities were described. The system has provided feedback about how well the organization is performing in the form of enrollment trends and evaluative data collected from both students and the member institutions. In short, Chapter 4 depicted a robust organizational system that possesses the necessary components to perform well. During the recurring cycles of activity for the consortium (semesters), new inputs have been generated and reinvested to help sustain the effort.

The concept of interdependence underlies efforts to understand the relationships among parts and illustrates why understanding connections within organizations is a challenging endeavor. Because of the interconnected nature of organizational elements, interdependence means that a change or problem affecting one part of the system impacts all the parts and the system as a whole (Birnbaum, 1988; Kezar, 2001; Morgan, 1997; Patton, 2002). The idea of interdependence and the importance of systemically considering the rippling effect that a change in one organizational element has on others were clearly illustrated by the issue of origination rights (described in detail in Chapter 4). In a later section, the interdependence among institutions will be discussed as it relates to positive group processes.

The issue of origination rights stemmed from concern about a specific structural aspect of the ICCOC that determined how courses were allocated among the institutions.

Tensions within the Oversight Committee arose because some of the partners believed their institution's needs were not adequately served by the existing structural arrangement. The problem impacted group processes as the Oversight Committee struggled over an extended period of time about how to best resolve the conflict. During the process of negotiating a resolution, discussions within the group returned repeatedly to both the purpose of the consortium and its outcomes. Ultimately, the group reached agreement to modify the structure of how courses were allocated among institutions, and the system was preserved. As a result of successfully solving this problem, the group's internal processes were reinforced, confidence was gained in the ability of the group to overcome problems, and the purpose of the organization was reaffirmed. This example of interdependence had a positive ending. However, had the Oversight Committee been unsuccessful in working out a resolution to this narrow problem of organizational structure, the organization could have quickly unraveled.

The discussion of the interdependence among organizational elements and how the collective interaction of the parts influences the whole continues in the section that follows. Linkages among the ICCOC's environment, its purpose, the design of the organization, and its viability will be explored.

Environmental Needs and Organizational Purpose: Fulfilling the Contract

Turmoil in the external environment and the accompanying threats and opportunities were identified as key factors that influenced the institutions to initially explore collaboration as a strategy. However, the role of the external environment in

explaining the ICCOC's performance extended beyond its catalyzing influence into the realm of organizational survival and the design of the organization.

In systems parlance, survival depends on an organization's ability to fulfill "an implicit agreement or contract" with its environment to meet specific needs and expectations (Hanna, 1988, p. 10). Meeting the needs of the external world generates new inputs and energy to help sustain the organization. As an organization meets the terms of the contract set forth by its environment--i.e., the organization provides outputs (products and services) that satisfy needs and expectations presented by the world outside the organization--new inputs are generated, and the system experiences renewal.

Ultimately, the viability and sustainability of the ICCOC can be attributed to the organization's ability to satisfy a two-part contract (its dual purpose) as defined by its external environment. One purpose of the consortium has been to meet the educational needs of students through the provision of online courses and support services. A second purpose (related to the first) has been to meet the needs of each member college. Meeting the expectations of students through online courses and comprehensive support services has led to increased enrollments, which has also helped address needs and expectations of the member institutions, especially in providing financial inputs to sustain the effort. However, a critical factor in the organization's survival has been its capacity to meet other institutional demands, in particular, a requirement by institutions to preserve key aspects of their institutional autonomy.

A concentrated effort to balance two distinct, sometimes divergent, purposes--referred to by one distance education administrator as "the delicate dance"--represents a

contribution of the case to the field of inter-institutional research. The literature exploring the concept of purpose in inter-institutional organizations has tended to be inwardly focused, emphasizing the creation of benefits for member institutions. For example, Gray (1989) wrote that, "Parties come together because each needs the others to advance their individual interests" (p. 6). Similarly, Baus and Ramsbottom (1999) stated: "Academic consortia form for one simple reason: to serve their member institutions." Certainly, the survival of collaborative organizations largely depends on their ability to meet the needs of member institutions. However, this case clearly illustrates that the viability of the ICCOC has been influenced not only through meeting the needs of member institutions, but also by the organization's capacity to meet the needs of a second key stakeholder with no formal membership in the organization--the students.

Of course, the ICCOC has other stakeholders that exist in the external environment that can potentially impact its survival. A regional accrediting agency reviews and evaluates the ICCOC and its offerings and decides whether to attach its seal of approval. Each community college is governed by a local board that has the final say in approving budget and policy items that affect the ICCOC. With conditions attached, external funding agencies provide additional resources. Students completing online courses from the ICCOC encounter other colleges and universities that decide whether to accept or deny the transfer of credits. Organizations that employ the ICCOC's students evaluate their skills and abilities and form opinions as to the efficacy of the educational preparation. The potential impact of stakeholders beyond students and member institutions, was suggested in a study by Adams and DeFleur (cited by Carnevale, 2005)

indicating that, given the choice between two equal candidates, employers expressed a strong preference for individuals holding a traditional degree over those with a degree from a virtual institution.

The ICCOC's mission, strategies, and goals have been aligned to support its dual purpose. The importance of shared purpose, mission, strategies, and goals in explaining the success of the ICCOC is consistent with a theme in the literature that suggests the significance of a clear understanding of direction for the effort (Bergquist et al., 1995; Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999; Cropper, 1996; Donaldson & Kozoll, 1999; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Winer & Ray, 1994). This point is consistent with Offerman's (1985) finding that a contributing factor in the demise of consortia is a lack of clarity in the mission and goals. The capacity of the ICCOC to meet its dual purpose and the linkages among the environment, purpose, mission, strategies, and goals help set the stage for deeper understanding of the ICCOC as a whole. A clear understanding of the direction of the effort, grounded in a shared sense of purpose, has helped in the creation of workable structures and processes that meet the needs of both students and the member institutions.

The discussion that follows provides an interpretation of two organizational patterns--sound business practices and positive group relationships--that help illustrate the connections among the organizational factors and how they blend together to shape the behavior of the ICCOC as a whole. This section concludes with a discussion of the ICCOC's culture, which encompasses the two patterns and permeates all aspects of the organization.

Sound Business Practices: Organizing with the Environment in Mind

In the competitive realm of distance education, achieving rapid growth and long-term viability does not occur by accident. From a systems perspective, survival and success depend on the capacity and ability of a system to organize itself in a way that meets the requirements put forth by its environment (Hanna, 1988; Katz & Kahn, 1978). The initial decision by the colleges to adopt collaboration as a strategy to meet the demands presented by online education suggests an awareness of the business realities of a competitive market and the need to organize accordingly. Taking the concept a step further, systems thinking advances the notion that the development of key business strategies and processes are central factors in organizational efforts to survive (Hanna, 1988; Morgan, 1997).

The findings from this case study are consistent with both systems thinking and an emerging strand in the literature that suggests “business-like characteristics,” such as a goal of self-sustainability, a focus on quality assurance, benchmarking, and standardization/scalability are critical in creating sustainable inter-institutional distance education organizations (Epper & Garn, 2003, p. 18). Without question, a pattern of sound business practices has contributed to the ICCOC’s viability by creating and aligning structures, processes, and outcomes in a way that meets the needs of students and needs of the institutions. The ICCOC’s rapid growth in enrollment, financial self-sufficiency, and the preservation of their market share reflect a degree of business savvy in the operation of the collaborative enterprise. In addition, the overall pattern of sound business practices has contributed to the perception of a positive bottom line, “simple

success,” reflected by the prevalent belief that no one wants to “kill the goose that’s laying the golden eggs.”

At the core of sound business practices is the fact the consortium has been able to generate sufficient revenues through its core operations to fund all its activities (although seed money from eCollege helped in the startup phase, and the Title III grant has funded some new initiatives). In contrast, discussions in the literature about the financial aspects of consortia have tended to focus on the nagging problem of how to provide funding to sustain efforts (e.g., Offerman, 1985; Baus & Ramsbottom, 1999; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). Most collaborative distance education consortia have been initially underwritten by direct appropriations and continue to be heavily subsidized, although evidence suggests that some, like the ICCOC, have built sustainable revenue streams (Epper & Garn, 2003). The capacity of the ICCOC to generate a positive cash flow has been a key factor in the establishing and maintaining support for the concept at the home colleges.

The ICCOC’s ability to fully fund operations, including reinvesting in training and staff development, has corresponded with a steady growth in enrollment and tuition revenues and the ability to contain costs. The large number of enrollments can be attributed primarily to increasing participation by students considered as part of the traditional population bases for each college. As a general business strategy, this approach might be characterized as “picking the low hanging fruit.” The benefit to the ICCOC has been its ability to attract large numbers of students without expending significant staff time and money on recruitment. In addition, as a defensive strategy, attracting a large number of local students has addressed the primary concern that contributed to the

formation of the consortium in the first place--the fear of losing students to competitors. The fact that the clear majority of the students enrolling in the ICCOC's courses are from the colleges' traditional student population is also consistent with national data that estimates 80 percent of online enrollments are attributable to students already taking classes on home campuses (Zemsky & Massy, 2004).

The chief academic officers and distance education officers serving on the Oversight Committee work with budgets and staffing levels on a daily basis, so it is not surprising that the organization would have an effective budgeting process and efficient staffing arrangements. The small number of staff positions funded by the consortium is attributable to active engagement on the part of the Oversight Committee in governing the activities of the consortium, the productivity of the people on the consortium's core staff, and the decision to integrate the organization with the home campuses in such areas as accounting, publications, registration, and financial aid. Costs have been contained as a result of distributing expenses across seven colleges (e.g., the learning management system, 24/7 support, marketing) and operating the organization with lean staffing levels.

Chapter 4 described several elements within the core operational processes that also suggest effective business practices. The decision to partner with eCollege to provide the learning management system and comprehensive support is particularly noteworthy, providing an example of a sound business decision that has paid great dividends and contributed directly to the bottom line. In addition to the start-up money eCollege provided, the company has provided a robust learning management platform and support services consistently praised by the Consortium members and evaluated favorably by

students and faculty members. eCollege has taken into account the volume of enrollments generated by the Consortium in negotiating the fee structure. In addition, the company has involved the ICCOC directly in research and development efforts to test new products and features. In short, the relationship has been valued by both parties and has contributed to each entity's bottom line.

Overall, the ICCOC's business practices are consistent with the position of Prester and Moller (2001): that survival and success in the market of distance education require a results-oriented approach in which processes, structures, and feedback systems are aligned with the purpose and goals of the organization. As discussed previously, the ICCOC provides a compelling example of the importance of organizational purpose in serving as a point of reference for activities and decisions. Other examples of the results-oriented business practices, aligned with its purpose and goals, include:

- Providing comprehensive support services to students, instructors, and staff
- Collecting detailed data to evaluate performance and make adjustments
- Focusing on continuous improvement in the quality of courses and support services
- Benchmarking "best practices" with other collaborative organizations
- Standardizing key elements of the output generated by the consortium, for example, in creating standards for syllabi, faculty training, and levels of technical support
- Actively seeking ways to increase the capacity to offer more courses and programs in targeted areas
- Pursuing new avenues to market the consortium's courses and programs

- Investing revenues over direct expenses back into the consortium's operation in the form of training and staff development opportunities

Capable analysis and planning have been key components contributing to the business success of the consortium. However, one of the major challenges facing collaborative organizations is in maintaining the discipline required to follow discussions and agreement with action and implementation. And beyond action, discipline is required to collect data to see whether the results reflect the desired outcomes. From a business perspective, a fundamental strength of the ICCOC has been diligence in “dogging the details,” a characteristic Milliron and Prentice (2004) associated with following through with the difficult aspects of planning, documented and systemic implementation, and thorough evaluation.

Considering the performance of the ICCOC from the perspective of business practices, success is explained as flowing from disciplined analysis, good decision-making, capable implementation, and concentrated efforts to make adjustments based on systematic feedback. This perspective reflects a rational or “hard systems” approach that assumes organizational systems can be engineered to achieve objectives (Checkland & Scholes, 1999, p. A49). Efforts to seek gains in effectiveness and efficiencies in structures and processes have been ongoing, with the results measured by carefully collected data, and overall success of the consortium judged on specific criteria.

As a whole, the pattern of effective business practices has contributed to the creation of a competitive advantage for the ICCOC in the online education market. By pooling resources and combining the talents of staff members, the relative costs of

delivering and supporting online education have been reduced for each college, the array of offerings has been broadened, and the provision of support services has been expanded. From the demand side, cost savings through collaboration have helped keep tuition costs in line with the college's on-campus classes and compare favorably to online tuition rates from most other providers. The cost, convenience, support, and familiarity with the "brand" of the institutions--and the overall value compared with other options--have provided strong incentives for students to enroll in the ICCOC's online courses.

Positive Group Relationships, Interdependence, and Negotiated Order

One of the key findings described in Chapter 4 was the importance of the Oversight Committee in working effectively together as a group. Ultimately, the ICCOC's implementation of effective business practices and its ability to meet the needs of students and member institutions through the creation of a robust, collaborative organization is directly attributable to the work of the Oversight Committee. Every facet of the organization--from defining its purpose to determining operational details--has emanated from the Oversight Committee. The ability of this group to create and maintain positive relationships has been a critical factor in the organization's viability.

Chapter 4 described details and illustrated many of the factors at work in explaining the effectiveness and cohesiveness of the Oversight Committee, including the composition of the group, a sense of shared purpose, appropriate structural arrangements, the values of trust and respect, the practice of basic diplomacy, the use of consensus decision making, persistence and patience in solving conflicts, open communication, group cohesiveness, and leadership. These factors and the ways in which they have

blended together have been critical in creating a positive chemistry within the group that helps explain its ability to function effectively. The section that follows elaborates on several aspects of group processes from a systems perspective.

A key input to the system and a unique aspect of the group processes within the consortium has been the extraordinary level of engagement and commitment by the Oversight Committee, comprised of the consortium core staff, academic officers, and distance education administrators. In contrast, Baus and Ramsbottom (1999, p. 16) wrote: "In most cases, consortium staff must accept that, for the participants, the consortium is a low priority in the context of campus issues and day-to-day responsibilities . . ." To the ICCOC's credit and advantage, the work of the organization has occupied a prominent place in the hearts and minds of the people involved. As a result, the members of the Oversight Committee have demonstrated personal dedication and enthusiasm about the purpose of the organization--to collaborate in offering online courses and programs to students in a way that also meets the interests of their respective colleges. In addition, the members conveyed a strong ownership of the organization, and as individuals they have a "voice" in determining its direction.

Members of the Oversight Committee have been personally and professionally vested in the success of the collaboration, and they have found the work rewarding. During the interviews, a genuine sense of enjoyment in working with the others in the group was apparent, despite the fact that for many of the individuals involved, consortium activities have been layered on top of existing institutional responsibilities. The personal rewards for those involved were not related to money, promotions, or individual

recognition. Rather, much of the satisfaction derived has stemmed from a feeling of accomplishment and pride in being a part of something special. The comments by Ross, a chief academic officer, are telling: "At the heart and soul of the consortium, people enjoy doing something different--collaborating across the institutions where there is something that's bigger than my school versus your school."

In addition to the strong personal interest in the work of the consortium, a second major factor--the degree of interdependence among the colleges--helps explain the level of involvement by the Oversight members and the strong interest in working effectively together as a group. Considered at the institutional level, interdependence has been described by Kanter (1994) simply as, "the partners need each other" (p. 100). In the context of the connections and relationships among the member institutions, this definition is consistent with a primary goal of collaboration--to generate benefits by working together that would not be possible by working alone. One of the most surprising aspects of this case was the extent of interdependence within the ICCOC.

The seven member institutions are entirely reliant on the ICCOC as the exclusive vehicle to deliver online credit courses. In contrast to collaborative distance education initiatives in which partners focus efforts in a particular niche, such as joint marketing or delivery of a specific degree program, virtually all of the seven member college's online credit activities and components are shared among the members through the consortium, including students, instructors, training, staff expertise, and a portion of every tuition dollar generated. As a result, the member colleges--and their successes and failures in

online education--have been inextricably linked together through the network of structures and processes that comprise the ICCOC.

The members of the Oversight Committee were keenly aware of the business implications in that, should the Consortium fall apart, member institutions would be forced to compete with each other, and do so with their own resources. Even for the larger member colleges who possess adequate resources to independently offer an online program, the costs associated with “going it alone” have been perceived to be greater than projected gains. The practical implication of the interdependence is that the participants realized should the seven institutions part company, they could not individually begin to recreate what they currently have through the collaboration. As such, the degree of dependence on the ICCOC to supply essential components of the online system has provided a powerful rational incentive for the group to maintain positive relationships and work out differences.

The personal interest and commitment by the individuals on the Oversight Committee in collaborating to offer online courses and programs and the rational awareness among the players that the institutions need each other to continue to reap the benefits have helped keep the effort on track. However, the organization’s viability has also hinged on the group’s ability to successfully negotiate and resolve a myriad of details that, if not handled appropriately, could undermine the effort.

Gray (1989, p. 228) identified the concept of “negotiated order” as a useful construct in understanding group dynamics in a collaborative setting. Gray defined negotiated order as “a social context in which relationships are negotiated and

renegotiated.” Rather than a rigid system, highly constrained by formal organizational rules, regulation, and hierarchical relationships, the emphasis with collaborative arrangements is on “fluid, continuously emerging qualities of the organization, the changing web of interactions woven among its members,” which suggests that “order is something that members of the organizations must constantly work . . .” (Day & Day, 1977, p. 132). The nature of continuous changes in environmental demands (for example, shifting expectations from students or institutions) suggests the need for collaborators to continually work to negotiate and renegotiate the terms of their arrangement--including how they collaborate (Gray, 1989). Similarly, Ring and Van De Ven (1994) argued that collaborative arrangements are works in progress, “continually shaped and restructured by actions and symbolic interpretations of the parties involved” (p. 96).

The vigilance exhibited by the Oversight Committee members in constantly working to provide for the care and feeding of the relationships within the group reflects an awareness of the fragile nature of the collaboration. Acting as good relationship stewards has helped prevent small problems from escalating into major conflicts. In addition, monitoring the relationship barometer and addressing sources of problems early have been instrumental strategies in helping to stave off what is referred to in systems language as entropy--a natural movement of organizations toward disorganization and demise (Hanna, 1988).

One of the striking characteristics of the consortium is that from day one, the Oversight Committee has paid close attention to relationship basics. The values of trust and respect permeated relations, and principles of basic diplomacy governed interactions.

The result was the creation of a “collegial” and “kind” atmosphere in which people have felt comfortable in voicing concerns without fear of reprisal.

Given the number of people involved, it seemed likely that the Oversight group would include several contrarians who might be expected to stir up problems. However, there was not a hint of what could be considered “personality conflicts.” During the interviews, the researcher questioned how this could be possible. Participants expressed puzzlement themselves, largely attributing the phenomenon to “luck” with regard to the people and “personalities” of those involved. While an element of chance may have been involved in gathering the right mix of people initially, the effort has also benefited by a conscious effort within the group to work hard at getting along. As a result of successfully negotiating the terms of the relationships within the consortium, the group has been able to devote most of its time addressing operational issues without distractions and dysfunctions stemming from relational problems.

For effective inter-institutional collaboration to occur, the parties must agree on the terms governing their relationship, with some facets planned and others evolving informally (Nathan & Mitroff, 1991). As described in the findings, the ICCOC has relied on very little in the way of formal rules to govern their relationship. Rather, the arrangement has been based on common understandings about how the group should interact, its purpose, strategies, structures and processes. Common understandings, or “shared meanings,” have been identified as an essential condition for achieving a negotiated order conducive to inter-institutional collaboration (Bennington, Shetler, &

Shaw, 2003). The concept of shared meanings and their influence on the organization's performance will be explored in the ensuing discussion of the culture of the ICCOC.

The Culture of the ICCOC

What I was most amazed about was the cooperative nature of the group. You have some very strong personalities in there, but there was not any level of competition or self-interest for their own institution. The discussions were always based on what is best to fit the needs of the students and the consortium (Carol, distance education administrator, describing her initial impressions of the Oversight Committee).

As people interact within the structures and processes of organizations, they constantly try to draw inferences, identify patterns, create order, and construct meanings (Birnbaum, 1988). The meanings people attribute to their experiences (like Carol's first perceptions of the Oversight Committee) and the processes through which shared meanings are socially constructed form the basis of organizational culture (Checkland & Scholes, 1999; Morgan, 1997; Tierney, 1988;). Birnbaum (1988, p. 72) described culture as "the social or normative glue that holds an organization together" that influences "what people . . . perceive and how they behave." Stated another way, culture provides meaning and context for people within an organization (Schein, 2004; Tierney, 1988).

In the literature exploring inter-institutional collaborations, the topic of culture has typically been discussed as a problem or barrier to collaborating due to the differences that exist among the partners (e.g., Austin, 2000; Gray, 1989; Berquist, 1995). However, Glowacki-Dudka (1999) recommended that an "ultimate goal of collaborators is to create a common collaborative culture that is well-defined and understood by each partner involved" (p. 232). While the word "create" may suggest more control than actually

exists, it is widely believed that leaders can help influence culture in organizations (Bolman & Deal, 1997; Schein, 2004). And, although Donaldson and Kozoll (1999, p. 12) did not use the term culture explicitly, their declarative covers most of the cultural bases:

For collaboration to be successful it must also be characterized by the transcendent values and norms. These include both the process norms of equity, trust, and reciprocity, but also the shared values and norms that lead to a vision and goals for the collaborative effort.

The prevalent culture within an organization exerts a powerful influence on its performance (Birnbaum, 1988; Bolman & Deal, 1997; Schein, 2004). The dominant culture can be weak or strong, but either way exerts a “powerful influence throughout the organization” (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 4). Even though the ICCOC has existed a short period of time, the findings suggest the presence of a strong organizational culture that influences, in positive way, how people make sense of their experiences and how they behave.

Clues about an organization’s culture can be gathered by studying patterns of what is done, how it is done, and who is involved in doing it (Tierney, 1988). Similarly, Morgan (1997, p. 144) suggested that clues about an organization’s culture are “embedded in the routine aspects of everyday practice.” The interviews, observations, and document review provided data from which inferences have been drawn about the way things are done within the ICCOC, as well as the important values, beliefs, norms, and patterns within the ICCOC’s culture.

In describing how the Oversight Committee operates, Beverly, a distance education administrator, described the prevailing mindset of the group: “We come to

work day in and day out to problems we face on our campuses that we can't solve, but when the ICCOC group gets together, it's almost like we're looking at things through a different lens." The ICCOC's culture acts as a "lens" through which the Oversight Committee and Consortium core staff view their experiences. As the inferences, patterns, and sense-making of the people involved with the development and operation of the ICCOC have become more consistent, the shared experiences, understandings, beliefs, values, and norms have created a strong culture of collaboration.

The ICCOC's culture--reflected in its values, beliefs, and patterns--has provided a powerful social influence that has shaped and reinforced patterns of behavior. These cultural facets are intertwined with the other system elements to provide important points of reference as the organization conducts routine business, seeks new opportunities, and resolves problems. For example, the business success of the consortium, shaped by forces in the external environment, influences the culture of the organization in terms of the tenor of group processes, which, in turn, affects the entire system.

In addition, meanings that people derive from their experiences shape individuals' behaviors which, in turn, collectively influence the behavior of the organization. As the ICCOC system has worked through repeated operational cycles, the people involved have shared the experiences of frustrations, setbacks, and success within a unique organization that has overcome significant odds in its survival. The meaning of success, in both the business and relational arenas, has inspired trust in the organization as a whole and instilled a collective confidence that with due diligence, not only can the organization

overcome problems and barriers, it can excel in a very competitive market. In essence, the narrative of the ICCOC affirms the adage, “Success breeds success.”

The shared experiences of “simple success” and a feeling of group control has created a positive spiral of performance in which the ICCOC’s cycles of work and success have reinforced the purpose, strategies, structures, processes, and culture of the ICCOC. Senge (1990, p. 81) refers to such “reinforcing loops” as “virtuous cycles” in which processes reinforce desired directions. The group processes, as well as the direction and design of the ICCOC, have been affirmed by the perceptions of the organization’s success.

Clues about the ICCOC’s culture, the lens through which participants view and interpret their experiences, can be found in the ICCOC’s shared beliefs, values, and norms, which in turn influence overall patterns. The findings suggest that collectively the interaction of the cultural elements described below and the shared experiences of the group have contributed to the ability of the organization to remain viable.

Shared beliefs that guide the organization include:

- “We’re in it for the long haul, so we work things out.”
- Active engagement in online education is critical to the well-being of each institution.
- Serving the online educational needs of students is a meritorious goal.
- Expanding programs and increasing enrollments are important in sustaining the effort.
- “We accomplish more together than we can individually.”
- The organization can handle any barriers and problems it may encounter.
- Continuous improvement in all areas is required to stay competitive.
- Decisions should be data driven.
- When differences exist, the time it takes to reach consensus is time well-spent.
- Leadership is a shared responsibility

- Failure of the consortium would be a severe loss to the well-being of each institution.

Values and norms include:

- Trust, respect, honesty (basic diplomacy)
- Check territorialism at the door
- Loyalty to the group
- Friendship
- A drive to achieve and progress
- Non-competitiveness from within
- Open communication and continuous discourse
- Consensus decision-making
- Patience and persistence in resolving problems

The norm of non-competitiveness illustrates the strength and influence of the ICCOC's culture. As people within an organization interact, share experiences, and develop values, norms emerge that communicate "expectations about what people are supposed to do in given situations" (Birnbaum, 1988, p. 97). These norms, or "informal rules," govern how well a group functions and how group members conduct themselves (Bolman & Deal, 1997, p. 154). One of the challenges in creating and sustaining collaborative efforts is a cultural norm in the U.S. that emphasizes individualism (Neal, 1988). A problem in collaborative arrangements is that the cultural orientation toward the self "encourages people to view collaboration with skepticism" and negotiating as a sign of weakness (Gray, 1989, p. 250). As a result, the competitive tendencies of institutions and individuals often undermine the capacity to share power within collaborations (Offerman, 1997).

In contrast, it was clear from the data that competition from within the group was not a problem facing the ICCOC. A norm of avoiding competitive behaviors has been

embedded in the day-to-day operation of the group, reflecting a shared understanding within the Oversight Committee that competitive behaviors undermine positive group processes and the collaborative arrangement as a whole. As a result, sanctions exist for those who violate the norm: “On the rare occasion when someone starts getting competitive, one of us jumps right in and calls them on it.”

The ICCOC’s annual conference provides another example of the organization’s culture. In Chapter 4, the annual conference was described as an avenue to share information about operational issues, best practices, and plans for the future, as well as a way to communicate the history, values, and beliefs of the organization. In addition, the event can be viewed as an annual ritual in which the group celebrates the year’s accomplishments. The evening banquet at the conference provides a forum to recognize the contributions of everyone involved and serves as a reminder of where the organization began. The conference symbolizes the essence of the organization, the ability to successfully collaborate across seven institutions. In addition, the event serves as an opportunity to socialize new members into the way things are done within the ICCOC by reviewing what’s transpired in the past, communicating about what’s important to the organization, and providing a sense of what the future holds.

Two primary faces of the collaboration described previously--patterns of effective business practices and positive group processes--illustrate a complex balance within the ICCOC’s culture and how the prevailing values, beliefs, norms, and meanings are integrated into the system as a whole. The pattern of business practices places a premium on growth, continuous improvement in core tasks, and aggressively competing in the

marketplace. This rational stream of activity emphasizes data analysis and alignment of the parts to ensure structures and processes are designed to meet the purpose of the organization. One participant compared the group's business-like orientation as the Nike philosophy of "Just do it." In other words, the business side of the organization has aggressively sought out opportunities, quickly analyzed the pathways to success, and taken action.

In contrast, the face of positive group processes has placed a premium on people and relationships. This relational stream of activity has emphasized less clearly defined concepts such as diplomacy, teamwork, motivation, and commitment. When an Oversight member has been nervous about the direction of the organization, or when disagreements have emerged, the group has demonstrated a willingness to back off until consensus has been reached to move forward ("We're very, very good at dancing around that and dealing respectfully with it. And basically what happens is that we respect the views of that person whoever it is. We defer to them.").

To recap--on the business side, the ICCOC's culture has accommodated both a hard charging approach and a strong desire to compete and achieve. Concurrently, the relational side has supplied a reality check that, at its core, the collaboration is about maintaining positive relationships and open, ongoing discourse about how the organization can "continue to grow and bring everybody forward." The ICCOC's culture reflects a balance in blending the beliefs, values, and norms that support each of the two faces. The Oversight Committee has pushed aggressively forward from the business side, but only when consensus has been reached to do so. Conflicts haven't always been

resolved quickly, but they have been resolved effectively, to everyone's satisfaction. The norm of communicating openly with people freely expressing concerns reflects the deep trust that has existed within the group that has been critical in maintaining balance in the organization.

In relation to the whole, the business and relational patterns have been transcended by organizational purpose. Both patterns have been vital in meeting the needs of both students and the institutions, and both patterns contribute to the survival of organization by providing energy and renewal. Effective business practices provide financial inputs to the system. Positive group relationships supply the creative and social energy needed to sustain the effort. The beacon of organizational purpose, together with the patterns of effective business practices and positive group relationships, in the context of the overall culture, help explain how the whole of the ICCOC is greater than the sum of the parts.

Implications

A number of implications flow from the findings and discussion that may provide guidance to others as they consider, initiate, or participate in collaborative endeavors. While these implications have been formulated with distance education consortia in mind, the ideas presented may inform other collaborative contexts as well.

Those interested in pursuing inter-institutional collaboration should be aware that in the alchemy of creating consortia, no simple formula exists to guide efforts. Many elements must gel for the effort to be sustained. However, by identifying the key elements in play and seeking an understanding of how they interact with each other, groups

interested in collaboration can help increase the likelihood of success. Below I share some implications for practice stemming from the study.

Context. In considering whether or not to pursue inter-institutional collaboration as a strategy, the potential partners should assess the degree to which a compelling contextual condition exists to pursue a collaborative arrangement. This case suggests that a serious problem in the external environment, shared by all the member institutions, provides the most fertile ground to plant the seeds of collaboration. In addition, the planners should carefully consider the requirements presented by the organization's environment, both from the home institutions and the student populations they wish to serve through distance education, as well as the timing of the endeavor. Demands from other stakeholder groups, such as governing boards, accrediting agencies, and employers should also be taken into account.

Constancy of Purpose. Collaborators must reach clear agreement about the purpose of the organization, the needs that will be met through the collaboration, and the principles and strategies that will guide the effort. The purpose of the consortium provides stability and a point reference for everything that follows. Member institutions must discuss and agree on the nuances of what the institution is about at its core. For example, serving students through online courses and programs seems to present a laudable purpose, but what does it mean to each of the partners, and other educational stakeholders, to be in the "business of delivering customer satisfaction," as Twitchell (2004, p. 48) describes?

Inputs. Organizers should pay close attention to the inputs that are required to sustain the organization. The composition of the steering group directly affects group processes, making it a critical factor in whether the effort succeeds or fails.

Representation should include key individuals from each college who have both a deep interest in the problem and the appropriate influence and decision-making authority at their home campus. Ideally, members should possess interpersonal competence in dealing diplomatically with others. Problems are likely to emerge if individuals in key positions who should be involved (e.g. academic officers and distance education administrators) have styles, assumptions, and attitudes incongruent with a collaborative approach.

The issue of how the consortium will be funded must be addressed early on. A lack of stable funding undermines commitment to the effort. Creating a model that generates revenues from operations removes a primary factor associated with failed consortia, inadequate or unstable funding.

Partner institutions should be chosen with care. The importance of selecting compatible partners was suggested by Kanter's (1994) analogy of the process as moving from courtship through various stages to the marriage vows. Good partners have integrity, share an urgency to do something about a particular problem, bring something of value to the table, and are willing to invest in the effort. Voluntary membership, as opposed to those created by mandate, may be a critical determinant in success.

Structures. Structures should flow from the purpose and needs. However, many different paths can lead to the desired results (Hanna, 1988). Determining how the consortium will be staffed, the degree of integration between the consortium and the

home institutions, and how to balance the expectations of students for standardization and seamless services and the expectations of member institutions to retain autonomy in specific domains are significant decisions. Planners should consider simple, but equitable formal organizational structures, for example, one vote per school and a simple formula for sharing revenues and expenses.

Core Operational Processes/Effective Business Practices. The business aspects and related core processes involved in the provision of online courses and comprehensive support services are vital. These core processes and practices determine how well the program does in the market, which directly affects finances. As such, a critical decision rests with selecting a learning management system provider. The management group should adopt a mindset of continuously seeking ways to improve all facets of the operation.

Group Processes/Positive Group Relationship. The effectiveness of the management group holds the key to the success of the organization. Ultimately, they are responsible for planning, organizing, monitoring progress, and selling the consortium to the home institutions. Poor decisions or dysfunctional relationships can quickly derail efforts.

Therefore, the degree to which positive group relationships are negotiated and developed early on is a critical factor in success. Members need to discuss what kind of organization they aspire to be and the values and beliefs that will define who they are and what they do. Trust, respect, open communication, and non-competitiveness are vital qualities. Abiding by these ideals is easier said than done. Therefore, efforts to maintain

positive group relationships should be ongoing, and members must be vigilant in addressing potential problems. An atmosphere of trust in which people feel comfortable in expressing open discourse is critical.

The question of how decisions will be made is important. Rather than voting, which results in situations in which some members “win” while others “lose,” consensus decision-making should be considered. Margaret Thatcher has been quoted as saying, “Consensus is the absence of leadership.” However, in the case of the ICCOC, consensus decision making was shown to produce sound choices, and it helped preserve positive relationships in the group. Consensus decision-making does not have to lead to the lowest common denominator and diluted judgment. Rather, through patient discourse, a shared purpose as a guide, and basic diplomacy as a norm, it is possible to reach solid decisions overall, without the hard feelings spawned by other approaches.

A key implication related to group processes involves the time commitment by all involved. Positive relationships do not typically form quickly, and consensus decision making takes considerable time. Planners might consider a series of face-to-face meetings to help jump start the team building process. It is also tempting in the digital age to try to conduct business primarily by technology. While email provides an important communication tool, this case showed that investing in time to meet face-to-face several times a year has paid big dividends.

Leadership. It is important for the director of the effort to model commitment to the purpose and inspire a sense of confidence the organization can succeed. However, the nature of collaboration requires each member of the management group to provide

leadership. Leadership takes many forms, but the ability to think systemically in seeing both the “whole” and the relationships between the parts is essential. Collaborative leadership seems to be the art of understanding the elements and bringing them together in a meaningful way through involving the right people, balancing a drive to achieve with diplomacy, and a willingness to afford others the opportunities to express alternative ideas without fear. In addition, the leadership within the group must exercise diligence in maintaining focus by “dogging” the details required to make the arrangement work.

Outcomes. Survival of the effort is contingent on member institutions seeing the benefits. Parties should have a clear idea of what they expect to gain from the collaboration. The results of the effort should be apparent to all. It is especially important to look for areas in which success can be shown early on to build confidence within the home institutions, as well as within the management group. The management group should also establish a set of critical factors that help assess the progress of the organization.

Implications Related to Systems Thinking. Those interested in pursuing collaborative endeavors need to think in terms of systems, rather than working from a checklist of important considerations. Systems thinking provides an analytical framework that helps in sorting through the inherent complexities involved in establishing collaborative organizations. While the collaborating across institutions will always be a complex, difficult endeavor, understanding and analyzing the factors in play and how they relate to each other and the whole seems to present a promising approach in improving the likelihood of success.

Given the high failure rate associated with collaborative efforts, practitioners should take note that the interdependence of the parts helps explain why the term “fragile” has been a term frequently associated with inter-institutional organizations (e.g., Bergquist et al, 1995; Bryant, 2003; Mattessich & Monsey, 1992; Verduin & Clark, 1991). The fragile state of collaborative organizations, including the ICCOC, is rooted in the potential to fail on numerous fronts. If a consortium is ineffective in addressing its contract with the environment to provide needed products or services, or if it fails to address the needs of the member institutions, the viability of the system will be jeopardized. In addition, an absence or deficiency in one of the organizational elements affects the other components, weakens the entire system, and undermines the collaboration. For example, a lack of adequate financial resources raises questions related to organizational purpose, prompts structural changes, and adds tension to the group processes. In short, given the number of critical links necessary for collaborative arrangements to work, the probability of one or more “deal stoppers” is increased.

Culture. Organizational culture presents both a potential problem and an opportunity for planners. Awareness and respect for the culture that each partner brings to the process is an important step in reconciling differences. The opportunity and challenge for conveners is that the new organization begins without a shared culture. As a blank slate, the individuals involved have an opportunity to shape the culture in positive ways.

One approach in bridging the differences and moving the organization forward in creating a positive culture is for the group to work diligently on instilling values, beliefs, and patterns that support collaborative relationships (e.g., using consensus decision-

making) while striving for balance in attending to both the business aspects and the relational aspects of the effort in light of the purpose of the organization. Of course, an atmosphere characterized by trust, respect, and non-competitiveness in which participants can freely express opinions and concerns is essential as the group negotiates the details of the arrangement.

Suggestions for Future Research

The field of inter-institutional collaboration provides a rich context for researching a diverse array of organizational issues involving inputs, structures, processes, outcomes, and culture. This study suggests a number of potential avenues for future research.

1. Case studies could be conducted on other successful inter-institutional collaborations to determine differences and similarities in the factors involved in explaining their viability. For example, the outcomes of consortia with voluntary memberships could be compared with those mandated by governing boards or states.
2. As collaborative organizations form, research could be conducted to learn more about the group processes involved in negotiating order within the planning group. Additional insights are needed into the factors that contribute to the creation of a positive group dynamic and how group relationships influence the organization as a whole.
3. Consortia, as emergent organizations, present a potentially rich context to study the rapid formation of values, beliefs, assumptions, norms, and shared meanings.

4. Leadership plays a vital role in collaborative efforts. However, the nature of leadership and how it impacts the development of collaborative organizations is an area in need of further exploration.
5. Research could explore the effectiveness of interventions in collaborative group processes. For example, can fundamentals of diplomacy be taught? Can planning groups be given a jump start in developing positive group processes by using an outside facilitator?
6. In the broader systems context, what are the implications of increasing competition in online learning and the corresponding emphasis on a business approach in which students are perceived as customers? What are the impacts on student learning and student development? What effect does escalating competition have on institutional values and traditions? And how does online education meet the needs of employers and society as a whole?

Concluding Thoughts

For a variety of reasons, collaborating effectively across institutions is a steep uphill climb. Despite the well-documented struggles and problems that have been associated with inter-institutional collaboration, this case provides a compelling example of the potential that exists for a distance education consortium to produce significant benefits for stakeholders. However, the findings and discussion also suggest that no simple formula exists that adequately accounts for the ICCOC's success. Rather, multiple factors in the environment, purpose, structures, and processes have interacted and blended in shaping the performance of this unique organization.

Systems thinking provided a framework to help sort through the complex web of connections involved in making the ICCOC work. Among the key factors that contributed to system's viability was the role of the Oversight group in understanding the demands and needs presented by the external environment as they related to the purpose of the collaboration. With the needs of the students and member institutions as guideposts, the Oversight Committee created and aligned strategies, inputs, structures, and processes necessary for the organization to succeed both from a business perspective and the perspectives of the member institutions.

In collaborative organizations, reaching agreement on the elements critical to success is easier said than done. This case illustrated the importance of assembling the right group of people to provide energy and commitment to the effort, as well as the wisdom and skills to negotiate the details of the organization's design and operation. The ability of the group to maintain positive group relationships has been a critical factor and can be attributed largely to the shared beliefs, values, and norms that exist within the ICCOC, as well as a rational awareness of what would be lost should the organization fail.

One of the primary goals (and strengths) of a collaborative approach is to share resources and costs to create advantages. The seven member institutions involved in the ICCOC have certainly been successful in sharing expenses, risks, instructors, students, staff, and ideas. This, in itself, is no small feat. More importantly, and more difficult to understand with precision, is the emergence of a shared culture and its role in shaping the organization's performance.

The prevailing culture of the ICCOC has both influenced and been influenced by the complex web of interactions and meanings that have permeated the daily work of the organization. The organizational culture reflects a critical balance between a strong drive to succeed in the competitive market of online education and a shared belief that, as a collaborative enterprise, the ability to build and maintain positive relationships is paramount. As the members of the group have experienced recurring cycles of success, the purpose, strategies, structures, and processes of the ICCOC, as well as the broader patterns of effective business practices and positive group relationships, have been reinforced. The cumulative effect has been the creation of a strong culture that has been a powerful influence in keeping the effort moving forward.

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APPENDIX A

FY2003 - ICCOC Agreement of Understanding

STATEMENT OF UNDERSTANDING
IOWA CC ONLINE

The seven following community colleges: Eastern Iowa Community College, Iowa Lakes Community College, Iowa Western Community College, Northwest Iowa Community College, Southeastern Community College, Southwestern Community College, and Western Iowa Tech Community College aware of a need to provide students the opportunity for instruction via the Internet, yet recognizing the challenge of providing a complete degree online; have voluntarily formed a cooperative partnership.

No separate legal entity has been created as a result. This partnership will recognize the individuality of each participating institution wherever possible, at the same time working toward similarity in process for the convenience of students.

This document is not intended as a contract but rather a statement of the understanding on a variety of issues which the seven participating community colleges have agreed to.

This is a working document, thus as additional issues are identified and practices agreed to by the consortium members, appropriate adjustments will be made to this document. The effective date of any additions will be noted.

BYLAWS
IOWA CC ONLINE

ARTICLE I: Name, Membership and Purpose

- 1:1 Name** Iowa Community College Online Consortium (ICCOC)
- 1:2 Membership** Membership in this partnership includes the following seven community colleges:
- Eastern Iowa Community College
 - Iowa Lakes Community College
 - Iowa Western Community College
 - Northwest Iowa Community College
 - Southeastern Community College
 - Southwestern Community College
 - Western Iowa Tech Community College
- 1:3 Mission** The mission of the Iowa Community College Online Consortium is to offer quality educational opportunities to online students supported by a comprehensive set of student support services.

APPENDIX B



Eastern Iowa
Iowa Lakes
Iowa Western
Northwest Iowa
Southeastern
Southwestern
Western Iowa Tech

www.iowacconline.com

Courses
Go To Class
Bookstores
Library Services
Contact Info
Financial Aid
Admin
ICCOC Homepage

Oversight Committee

Eastern Iowa

Jeff Armstrong Muscatine 1-800-351-4669 jarmstrong@eicc.edu	Cindy Bottrell Scott Community College 1-800-895-0811 ext. 4344 cbottrell@eicc.edu
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Iowa Lakes

Rick Underbakke 1-800-242-5106 runderbakke@iowalakes.edu	Theresa Zeigler 1-800-242-5106 ext. 148 tzeigler@iowalakes.edu	Tom Brotherton 712-852-5244 tbrotherton@iowalakes.edu
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Iowa Western

Robert Exley 1-800-432-5852 rexley@iwcc.edu	Barb Vredevel 1-800-432-5852 bvredevel@iwcc.edu
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Northwest Iowa

Rhonda Pennings 1-800-352-4907 rpennings@nwicc.cc.ia.us	Gretchen Bartelson 1-800-352-4907 gbartelson@nwicc.cc.ia.us
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Southeastern

Steve Rheinschmidt 1-319-752-2731 ext. 8315 steve@scclowa.edu	Chuck Chrisman 1-800-828-7322 ext. 8261 cchrisman@scclowa.edu
Rebecca Hannum 1-319-752-2731 ext. 8166 rhannum@scclowa.edu	Curt Blum 1-319-752-2731 ext. cblum@scclowa.edu

Southwestern

Chris Duree 1-800-247-4023 duree@swcc.cc.ia.us	Marge Welch 1-800-247-4023 welch@swcc.cc.ia.us	Cena Johnson 1-800-247-4023 johnson@swcc.cc.ia.us
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Western Iowa Tech

Verlyn Fick 1-800-352-4649 fickv@witcc.com	Eddie Dunn 1-800-352-4649 dunne@bandit.witcc.cc.ia
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APPENDIX C INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Name Code: _____ Date: _____

Interviews will be conducted using a semi-structured format. The purpose of these guiding questions is to provide a general framework to probe participant's perceptions of factors that contribute to the organization's viability and gain a better understand the context of the case.

Please tell me how you first became involved with the Consortium.

What do you think were the driving forces behind the creation of the Consortium?

What purpose do you think the Consortium serves, and what do you see as the most important goals?

How do you view the role of the Oversight Committee?

(How are decisions made?)

(What have been the biggest problems?)

(How would you describe the effectiveness of the committee?)

What do you think have been the most important ingredients contributing to the viability of the Consortium?

Processes?

Structures?

Culture?

Environment?

Strategies?

Leadership?

How would you describe the culture of the Consortium?

Shared values, beliefs, stories?

How would you describe your experience in working with the Consortium?

Overall, what do you think is the glue that keeps the collaboration together?

What do you think are the biggest challenges, problems, and threats to the Consortium?

How would you describe the future of the consortium?

If you could change one thing about the Consortium, what would it be?

Is there anything else you'd like to add that would help me understand the Consortium?

APPENDIX D

ICCOC Administrative Critical Factor Comparison												
Overall Reactions												
Overall, how satisfied are you with your online education experience?												
	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Summer 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Summer 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Very Satisfied/Satisfied	91.1%	89.0%	87.9%	88.6%	92.6%	91.0%	91.3%	91.5%	91.3%	91.0%	92.9%	92.0%
Satisfaction with Preparedness and Use of Online Learning System												
Overall, how satisfied are you with the preparation you received to use the online system?												
	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Summer 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Summer 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Strongly Agree/Agree	93.0%	94.2%	95.0%	95.4%	96.5%	96.3%	93.6%	94.1%	93.2%	94.1%	94.4%	94.7%
Overall, how satisfied are you with the support services provided by the HELP DESK?												
	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Summer 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Summer 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Very Satisfied/Satisfied	65.8%	58.1%	57.7%	65.8%	64.9%	57.4%	95.8%	95.4%	96.0%	95.8%	96.1%	97.1%
N/A	23.2%	35.9%	30.6%	32.0%	31.7%	40.7%						
	89.0%	94.0%	88.3%	97.8%	96.6%	98.1%						
Learning Environment												
This course was organized and structured in a manner that was conducive to learning.												
	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Summer 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Summer 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Strongly Agree/Agree	90.3%	88.6%	87.9%	88.1%	92.1%	92.1%	90.8%	90.3%	90.6%	89.7%	91.1%	91.5%
Overall, how satisfied are you with the eCollege learning system?												
	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Summer 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Summer 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Very Satisfied/Satisfied	92.2%	96.1%	94.0%	95.1%	96.0%	96.8%	95.0%	94.1%	93.8%	95.1%	95.3%	95.7%
Instructor												
I received feedback from the instructor in a timely manner.												
	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Summer 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Summer 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Strongly Agree/Agree	88.3%	83.8%	81.8%	83.5%	85.1%	82.7%	86.7%	87.4%	87.5%	86.2%	88.8%	87.5%
The instructor gave me individual attention.												
	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Summer 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Summer 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Strongly Agree/Agree	81.0%	78.5%	72.5%	77.3%	76.6%	70.3%	79.2%	79.2%	77.6%	78.3%	80.5%	79.6%
My overall level of satisfaction with the instruction / I would recommend this instructor:												
	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Summer 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Summer 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Strongly Agree/Agree	88.1%	85.6%	84.7%	79.3%	88.7%	88.3%	84.8%	85.7%	84.8%	85.0%	89.4%	88.1%
Course												
The learning goals for this course were clearly stated (syllabus clearly written & understood).												
	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Summer 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Summer 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
Strongly Agree/Agree	93.5%	91.7%	93.9%	93.0%	96.0%	95.4%	91.8%	94.2%	92.8%	92.7%	94.6%	94.7%
The intellectual challenge of this course was:												
	Fall 2000	Spring 2001	Summer 2001	Fall 2001	Spring 2002	Summer 2002	Fall 2002	Spring 2003	Summer 2003	Fall 2003	Spring 2004	Fall 2004
About right	86.8%	85.7%	84.2%	83.7%	85.5%	85.0%	82.5%	81.5%	81.3%	82.3%	85.1%	83.8%

APPENDIX E

3.0 ICCOC Organizational Structure & Staffing

3.0 Overview

The Iowa CC Online Consortium (ICCOC) relies on administration, faculty, and staff from all consortium colleges. Appendix 3A provides contacts for ICCOC staff, Oversight Committee, student services representatives, bookstore managers, library directors, and faculty.

The Oversight Committee was formed to govern the consortium consists of numerous individuals from each consortium college. However, each college has only one voting right on ICCOC issues.

The consortium staff consists of the following:

- Director – (1.0 FTE)
- Student Services Coordinator – (.75 FTE)
- Web Site Administrator – (.50 FTE)
- Technology Oversight – (.25 FTE)
- Faculty Trainer – (.20 FTE)
- Academic Programming Coordinator – (.20 FTE)

Illustration 3.1 provides an overview of the ICCOC organizational structure.

Illustration 3.1 ICCOC Organizational Structure

